

Summer Ashes

James Milne

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In This Series

- Summer Garden, 2019
 - A Fate in Eldrasa, 2019
 - Priestess of Ozandius, 2019
 - Fury of Balavid, 2020
 - Summer Ashes, 2020
-

Maps

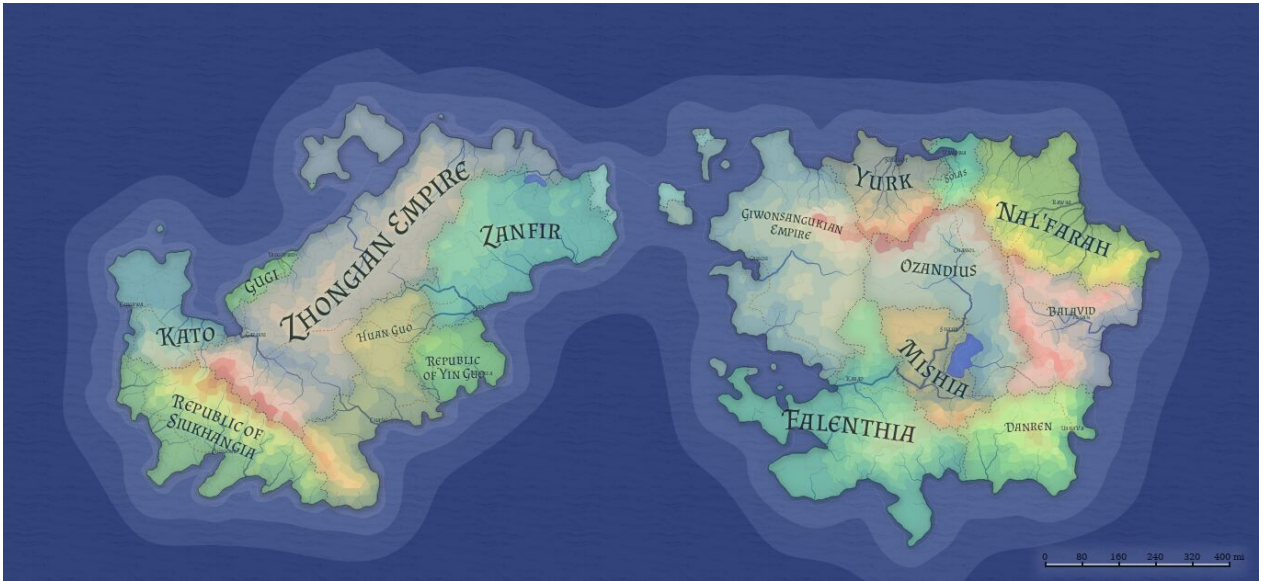


Figure 1: Mortal Plane



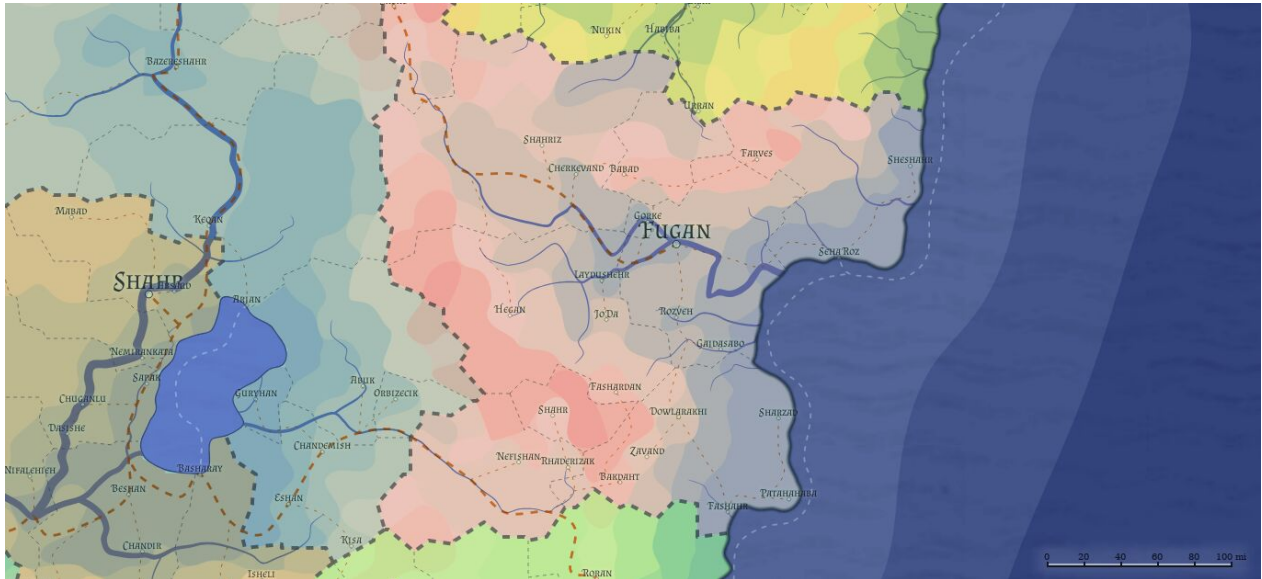


Figure 2: Balavid

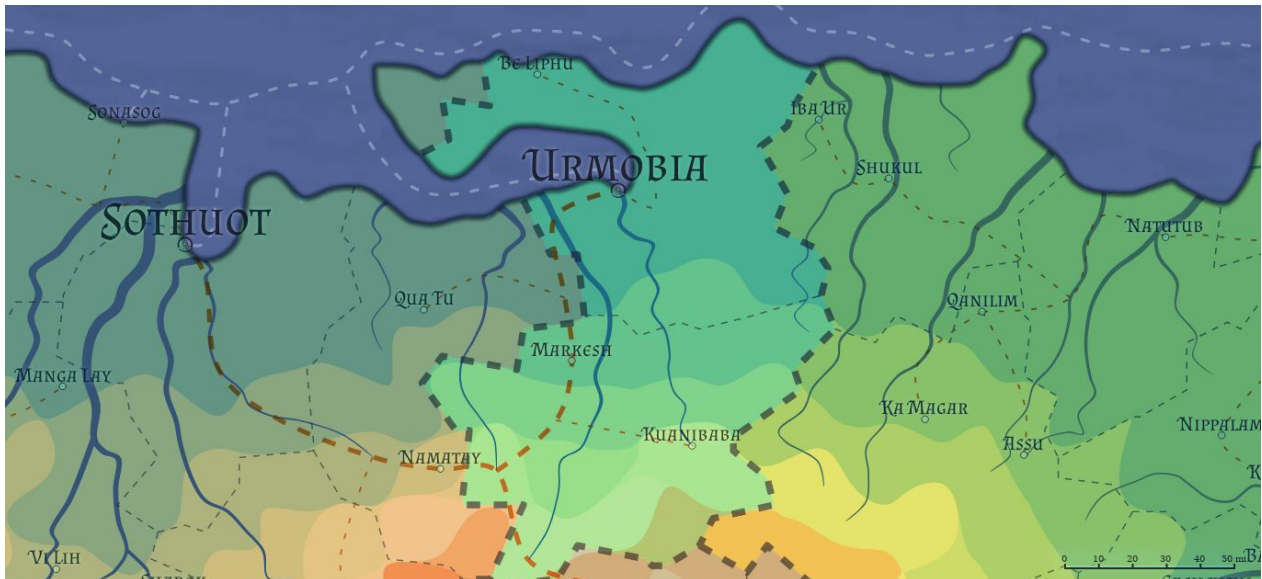


Figure 3: Solas

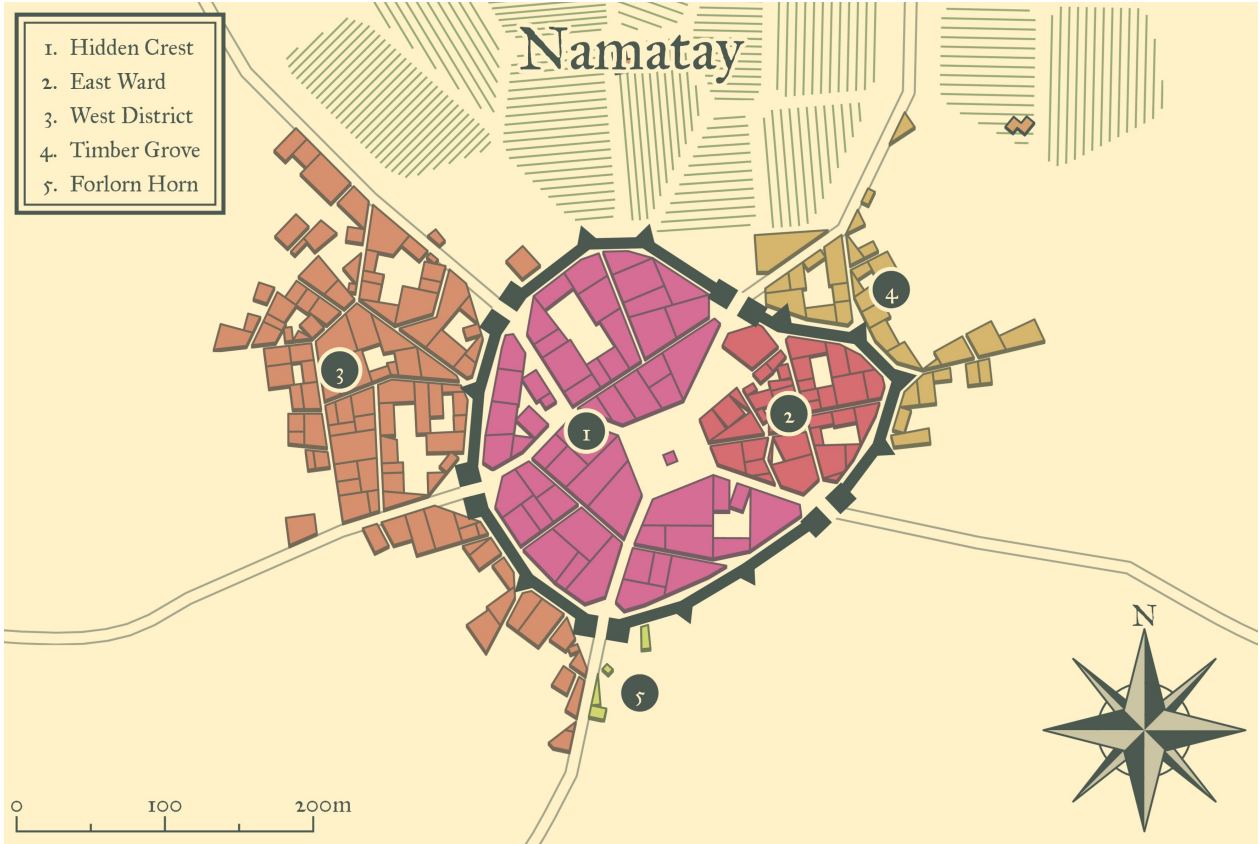


Figure 4: Namatay



Figure 5: Be Liphu

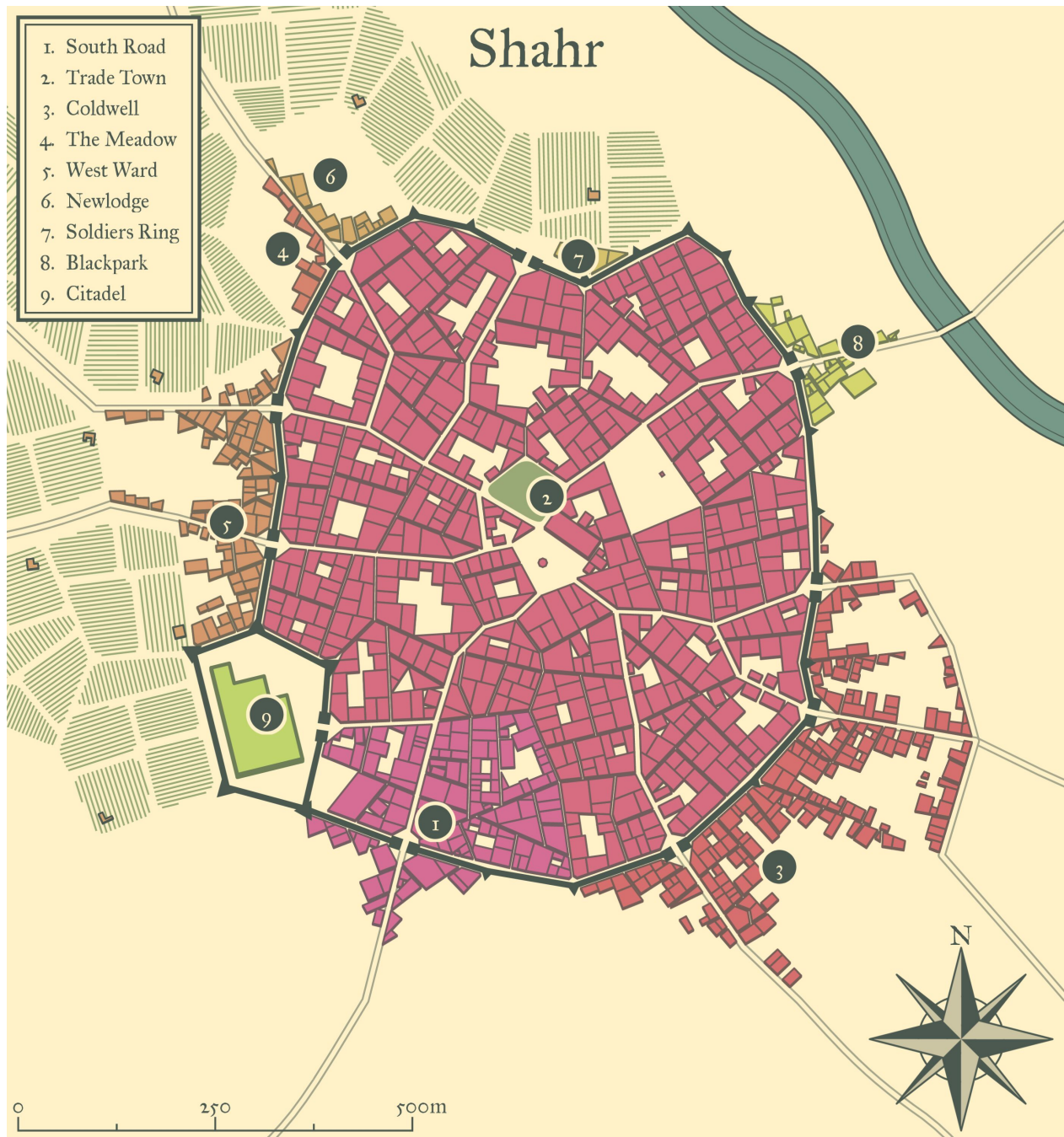


Figure 6: Shahr

Prologue

Summer

Summer played happily, dancing through the garden as she chased her daughter.

There was something she'd never imagined could be true. A miracle. She was the first Fae to give birth, ever. Her eternal people had never had a new generation before. Faith was a shining light in all the dark that happened so recently. She was the hope of every Fae, in every world.

The golden wings in front of her flitted as her daughter teased her, knowing she was faster than her mother could be without cheating. Summer grinned as she cheated, falling into a shift and reappearing in front of her as she caught the Faeling. The young Fae complained as she knocked them both to the ground, caught as her moth hugged her tightly.

When she was with Faith she felt safe, and whole. Even though Trei was absent, trying to arrange a peace treaty between the old pantheon of gods, and the one rising up under his leadership. He hadn't asked for it. He never wanted it. That was Trei. He'd never sought out power, but he had been handed it. From a dead blacksmith to one of the most powerful creatures in existence. He'd left his humanity behind a long time ago. Summer couldn't be prouder of him.

"Dinner, you two!" Luna called, waving from the house.

Summer stood up as Faith scrambled up to sit on top of her head. Summer grinned as she moved towards the house. She hadn't been this happy in so long. The only thing that came close was the day of her wedding, when she'd just about been sweating blood, terrified one of the attending gods would leap up and object to their union. Technically, Summer wasn't a god, or a Fae. She was the eternal, but not celestial, reincarnation of Sumner, the god of light. She couldn't remember being a god. Maybe that was one of Sumner's last mercies for her. To spare her from knowing why the god had sacrificed herself to create the Fae.

Claven was already sitting at the table, just about salivating as Luna began placing out bowls. She'd prepared a whole set. Bowls of peppermint leaves, sap chunks, and mixed petals. Luna was going all out, as she always did for her niece.

Summer caught Faith as she dove for the table, and smiled as the Faeling's fangs sank into her hand. "That's not how we express ourselves, Faith. Now, sit at the table. You'll get your food soon."

She rubbed her hand, healing it, and sat down as Luna came over. The white-haired Fae smiled at her, "Dig in. Any word from Trei?"

Summer shook her head, "Not yet. Not surprising. A roomful of gods. Can you imagine the measuring contests?"

Claven laughed with a mouthful of pink flowers, "Isn't Trei sort of in on that?"

Summer rolled her eyes, "He certainly does throw his authority around sometimes. Hopefully he and Kru aren't tearing a new hole in the 'verse."

"Shannon's there." Luna said, nibbling on a leaf, "Kru's probably taking her frustration out on her. The mortal who stopped a god."

Summer shot to her feet, turning, "Get Faith out of here, Luna!"

The front door crumbled to dust as the Fae swept up the confused, angry and hungry Faeling. Summer stepped forward, and winced as her face was burned by an enormous wall of flames. She twisted the wall, containing it to a single point, and then neutralised it.

The caster in front of her was a Fae. A Fae she knew, and hoped she would never see again. Her

sister. Ausosa. The Dawn. She was the in-between for Summer and Luna. She was also supposed to be locked in the deepest circle of hell for what she'd done. Resurrecting Tyr. Her husband who ended up trying to kill her, Luna, and everyone else in a vendetta to wipe out the gods and magic. He'd nearly managed it too.

Ausosa smiled at her, "Summer. It is good to see you. I doubt you feel the same."

"Void." Summer swore, "How did you escape?"

Ausosa shrugged, "Hero. Yio gave him the responsibility of being my keeper. He just happened to be the most power-hungry mortal to have ever lived. Seducing him wasn't difficult. Don't worry, I'll make sure to kill him when we're done here."

Summer didn't get a chance to respond. Her sister was stronger than she could believe. She knocked aside Summer's magic like it wasn't even there, and stepped forward, grabbing her by the throat.

She gagged as she felt her throat collapse under her sister's fingers. Summer fell to her knees as Ausosa shot passed her, grabbing Luna halfway through a shift and tearing her back into reality. Before the Shadow Knight could respond, Ausosa slammed her fist down, shattering Luna's head against the ground. If she could still breathe, she would have gasped.

Ausosa picked up the struggling Faeling easily and turned, "I was hoping you'd survive to see this."

Claven appeared out of nowhere, screaming in rage. Luna was dead. Claven had snapped, just like she had last time. Lost all sight of sanity, just anger and violence on her mind. Her magic was without focus, but incredibly dangerous and powerful.

Ausosa grabbed Claven by the chest and headbutted her hard enough to break her neck. She dropped the red head to the ground and rolled her shoulders. "As I was saying. I wanted you to see this. To know that you made all this possible. Your daughter, Summer. She's part celestial, twice over. The old pantheon, from Sumner and you. The new pantheon from Trei. She represents the lifestream. She's an avatar of it. If she were to grow up, she'd be more powerful than Trei and you combined."

Summer's eyes were beginning to water. It took time for a Fae to suffocate to death, even if it completely disabled them.

Ausosa held up Faith in one hand, as she punched down into Luna. There was sickening crack as the ribs shattered apart. Ausosa lifted up the heart in her other hand. "Luna is the source of the Fel. The corrupted magic. I'm good with it, but Luna is still the source. And your daughter is the path."

Summer stumbled forward weakly, desperately trying. Ausosa erected a barrier spell without trying.

Forcing Summer to watch as her sister killed her daughter.

Dyys

The woman stood over the hole in the ground. She could have made it instantly. It wasn't hard for her. But she wanted to do this by hand. Wanted it to mean something to her, because it hurt more than anything she'd done in her whole life. Both lives.

She'd died once. The light had gone out from her eyes. She was even buried. It was Bel who brought her back, or at least a piece of her. Brought her back by using a promise that Dyys had given her. One she'd given again. A promise to share her life. That Dyys would serve her, forever. Because she loved her.

Bel had been everything to her. Her entire reason for existing. She had run away from her life as a torturer of hell, knowing it wasn't what a Fury should be. Not what they were created for. Bel hadn't cared. She seen her glowing red hair that was a bundle of snakes, and she hadn't judged or even been afraid. She hadn't reacted when she'd found out that Dyys had a tail. She'd touched her scales, tracing them gently as she kissed her.

Dyys wiped hot tears out of her eyes as she shovelled the soil.

She missed that woman. Missed her smile and laughter. The farmhand who was brave enough to take on a dwergaz ruin. The woman who made magic look like child's play. Who learned anything after seeing it once.

She missed seeing her sign how much of an idiot Dyys was.

She yelled angrily and slammed the shovel into the ground, cratering the ground and destroying the shovel instantly. She fell to her knees, crying. She was alone now. Because of that Faen bitch. The woman who killed all the gods. Bel was just collateral damage to her. A necessary sacrifice.

With the death of the gods, and the tainting of the lifestream, resurrection was over. There was no way to bring Bel back, because she was gone. Her soul was torn apart and absorbed into the Fel. There was no coming back from that, not for anyone.

Because of Ausosa.

"I swear, Bel. I will kill her."

Trei

He blitzed into the realm. Breaking half a dozen rules about moving from one place to the next. He contained the exotic side effects as he arrived, and stared in horror. He had felt it. His daughter's death. Felt it from another realm.

He was needed there, trying to cajole the gods into some sort of peace in the lead up to the treaty signing, but this was more important. He didn't care what the fallout was. His daughter was in danger.

Except, she wasn't.

There was nothing left here. He looked at the burned ruins of the garden, unable to process it. This was Summer's pride. Beauty, and colour. Life living in unity. Yet, there was just... Nothing but ash. Burned out rats lying amongst the fallen charcoal that used to be trees. The dust where a cabin used to stand. A cabin where he'd met them. The women whose lives became tangled with his.

Luna, Astrian, Yio, and Summer.

He fell slowly to his knees. Summer was dead. And this time, he couldn't bring her back.

Faith had been the conduit. Ausosa had ruined the lifestream. Corrupted it beyond recovery. There would be no more gods after this. No more resurrections. All magic would lead to insanity. It would corrupt anyone who touched it, burning out all the good in them and leaving the unbalanced bad.

Trei punched the ground, causing the entire world to shake with the impact.

She'd taken Summer from him.

She'd sacrificed his daughter.

He couldn't bring them back. But he could make her pay.

He was going to make Ausosa beg to die.

Antoinette

She bowed her head to the shrine. She knew there was no one to hear her prayers. She'd helped to bury Sarin herself. She was there, when all the gods died. She was there with Shannon. The High Priestess. The only mortal brave and stupid enough to succeed when taking on a god.

Shannon was gone. She was killed in the same attack that killed Sarin. Killed, whilst protecting Antoinette.

She clenched her fists as the tears came again. She didn't want to cry. She hated herself for crying. She was supposed to be the strong one. The one who could stand up when everyone else was shaking at the knees. The one who kept the temple together whilst the fire burned and the city was nearly wiped from the face of the planet.

She remembered holding Shannon, begging her to survive. She hadn't seen her die. She was already gone. No chance to heal, no chance to live. She'd been killed instantly by the Fae who had waltzed in and turned every world upside down like it was her right.

She felt a reassuring hand squeeze her shoulder, and she stood up. She turned and saw the pink-eyed prophet, and smiled, "Verity. How'd you get here so fast?"

The woman rolled her eyes, "I left Ozandius a week ago. Something was happening. I did not expect to find all the fucking gods dead."

Antoinette breathed heavily, "I need you to do something for me."

"I'm not going to like it, am I?"

She shrugged, "I don't know. Probably not. I'm done, Verity. I'm out."

She yanked the hood off her cloak and tossed it on the ground, and shrugged, "Sarin's dead. Shannon is dead. Buried beside her. I don't have any reason for anything anymore. Nothing. And... And it's about time that the Temple went away as well. This world doesn't need it. It needs something better. The Sisters of Sarin are over. Because I say it. I swear I will make it happen if they ignore me."

Verity stepped back, terrified, "Don't walk down this path, Antoinette. Please."

She flicked her wrist, a ball of fire appearing over it, and tossed it over her shoulder. The shrine began to burn. "I will destroy every shrine on the continent. If the Temple doesn't stand down on their own."

She walked passed her friend, trying not to feel too hurt by the look of horror she saw there. "The gods are dead. Let them stay buried."

Astrian

She paused as she stepped inside the house, looking at the blood painting the back wall, and the two bodies beneath it. Friends. Trei's mother, and the blacksmith who had apprenticed him. Brought back by Trei's desperation after losing Summer.

"That's quite a message. Who is it from?" She said tiredly, turning.

The woman walked into view. Half her hair was red, and half was silver white. She looked the same as the last time Astrian had seen her, lifetimes ago. She groaned weakly, "Trei is out of my life, Ausosa. I want it to stay that way."

"Maybe." The Fae shrugged, "But you see, to taint the lifestream, I had to kill Faith. His daughter. He won't let that go. He will come to you, and he will make you do what he wants. Make you remember me. My weaknesses, my strengths. He will make you turn your expertise against me. You're not as useless a Fae as you always pretend to be."

Astrian sighed, "Get it over with, then."

Ausosa smiled, "For what it's worth, I always liked you."

Aurili

The praetor leaned heavily on the map table. The prince was mouthing off, but he was easy to ignore. Mostly because he didn't understand a single thing about what he was saying. He particularly didn't understand that the kingdom had received a message from Zanfir. A nation from another continent, one no one had thought actually existed. And now Zanfir were coming to meet the goddess who called for them.

To meet Kru.

Who was buried in their graveyard.

The useless wizard wasn't as easy to ignore. Ranting about how the kingdom was going to defeat all invaders. That he could harness the bodies of the gods to create new sources of magic. Lilibeth had been right when she'd called him the mad wizard.

She sighed, glaring up at him, "Dyys told us that magic is now tainted. How much have you been using?"

"It's not tainted." Carmichael waved a hand dismissively, "It's different. More powerful. Harder to control, yes, but I think I have the basics down."

Aurili felt like hitting him. He really was insane, and now probably going to get worse. "Our only advantage over Zanfir, if they decide to attack us, is that Ozandius is in the way, and they probably will fight them. The Giwonsangukian Empire has already cleared them passage. Probably Kru's doing, before she died, considering they've never let outsiders inside their borders before."

"Ozandius is on life support." Carmichael shrugged, "The only place with working farms is us. Thank goodness I made the gods cure the land around us before the treaty took place."

He hadn't. Trei had done it even before asking. That was the sort of man that god was. He looked out for people, before he threw his weight around. He was kind. Carmichael wasn't. He wouldn't ask for anything, unless he knew it wouldn't cost him. He'd steal it.

"So maybe we should focus on making sure those farms don't get burned by religious zealots." Aurili snapped, "Zealots who blame us for the god who was put in the ground when we were supposed to be protecting her. There is nothing we can do to earn forgiveness for that. Zealots don't forgive. They kill. Until someone kills them."

Carmichael sighed, "Fine. What have you found, praetorian?"

"I've found twelve thousand soldiers marching across the continent." She swallowed nervously, "Twelve thousand, minimum."

The wizard winced, "That is not inconsiderable."

"We have three hundred soldiers left." Aurili said bitterly, "Even if you can kill five hundred men on your own, we are hilariously outmatched."

Carmichael rolled his eyes, "A thousand. But yes, still outmatched. We need something to turn the tide. Which is why I've been saying -"

"We are not desecrating the corpse of a god you fucking freak!" Aurili snapped, glaring at him.

The wizard twitched, and then sighed, "Someone else called me a freak once. They died. I didn't. They got killed because they were too dumb to get out of the way. Too stupid to run away when someone started killing gods."

Lilibeth. She had been the other praetor of the Second Legion. Her partner. They'd been

through a lot together. Survived a dwergaz ruin together as kids. They'd both been called by the gods then. Aurili to be a servant of war, Lilibeth to be a prophet of Meria. That was when she'd sworn her vow of celibacy.

A vow she'd regretted almost every morning when she saw Lilibeth leap over the balcony to teach the recruits how to be stronger. How to be better. She was the one who had given her life for this stupid prince who charged into a dwergaz ruin without knowing the remotest thing about what he was up against. She died, and Dyys died, and the prince still needed an ex-god to escort him out.

And now Carmichael sat there pretending that Lilibeth was worth nothing.

Aurili slammed his head into the table. Before the mage could utter one of his spells she kicked him in the groin. He fell to the ground vomiting. She heard the prince babbling away in fear as she ripped the praetor's mark from her shoulder. She grabbed Carmichael's head and jerked it back, "This. This is why Lilibeth's dead. Because she cared enough to be there for our people."

She slammed the bronze shield down his throat and dropped his head.

She didn't say anything.

She just walked away. Let the kingdom burn. There was nothing left here anyway.

Alfar

She leaped out of her bed with a giggle, tossing her nightie aside. This was the day. Today she got to play and run. Today was her day with Garmr. She didn't have any duties, not expectations.

She pulled on the hooded dress quickly, adjusting it to hide her hair and ears, even though she knew the hood would blow off the moment the dog started running. If she didn't keep up appearances, then the others would be mad.

She froze as she reached for the door handle, and screwed up her face in disappointment. She'd forgotten. Today wasn't just the day she usually had off to play with her hellhound. Today was also the day of the vision.

It was only a few moments away. The others would see it, and she would see it as she saw that she would see it, as she had already seen it.

The garden would fall to ashes. The great one would fall by his own hand, torn by his responsibilities. The helpful one would destroy the world. The hateful one would watch, unopposed. The angry one would kill.

It wasn't avoidable.

This is what the future held. It was not changeable. The events were fixed. They had not changed since she had first seen them, so long ago, as a mere child. A young child who couldn't even babble out her name.

She opened the door slowly, looking up at the hellhound. He cocked his head at her curiously, usually by now she either given him a treat or pounced on him in a hug. She looked up at his beautiful face, and patted the black steel flecks that made up his fur, "Not today. Today is the day that was coming. The day that was. We need Antoinette. We need Aurili. The others will know it. They will come. And the Fae will return. May the gods forgive us. It isn't fair. I wanted to play."

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Summer Ashes

Dyys

She entered the library by breaking the door in half. She would have entered it in a less dramatic manner, but the door had been locked and she wasn't in the mood. She may have loved Bel, but she had no love of mortals. She didn't understand half their cultural rules, and she didn't particularly feel the need to hide who she was anymore. If the mortals were scared that she was different, they could get over it or die. Her patience was gone.

She walked over to a shelf, scanning the book bindings, and tags hanging from the scrolls. She heard someone behind her cough nervously, "Aren't... You going to ask about the dead body?"

Dyys shrugged, "Nothing to do with me, princeling."

Aaron Vanadreer, prince of the realm, coward of the continent. There was someone she didn't want prolonged contact with. If he was any bit as annoying as when she had saved his life in the ruins, then she might well kill him before they were done. For Bel's memory, she didn't want to kill a mortal. Not without good cause. She was trying to remain calm. Why couldn't everyone just leave her alone?

"Aurili killed him. For insulting Lilibeth."

Dyys laughed, "Well, what else did he expect she would do? Lilibeth's been dead for two days."

The prince moved behind her, and Dyys ground her fangs and turned, "Spit it out, princeling. I have other things I want to be doing."

He shrugged nervously, "Without Carmichael, and Aurili... The kingdom is under significant threat. The forces from Zanfir won't be far away. I was hoping that you might consider, possibly, helping us."

"Fuck off." Dyys said with a sweet smile, "Is that all?"

The prince's face fell, "So we're dead. All of us. This new kingdom will take us out, and we'll become a new colony."

Dyys shrugged, "Nothing to do with me, princeling. Even if this new kingdom hates my kind, which wouldn't be that surprising, they can't capture me. None of you can. None of you will. I've fought things that you can't imagine. I've touched the lifestream itself. Can the mages that Zanfir are sending claim the same? The Fel has infected everything magical. Making it stronger, and wilder."

The prince was confused at her last statement, and she touched her hair, the glow suppressed, "Most people can't look at me, Vanadreer. Not in my true form. Bel could, only because she took my blood. Like you did, once. She became part demon, for a time. I am magical, right down to my core. So I don't have time to waste. The Fel will get me, eventually. And the woman I am going to kill controls the Fel."

The prince nodded slowly, "You're going after the attacker?"

"Ausosa." Dyys bit off every syllable, "That is her name. Now, unless you want to help me find out what the fuck happened to her, and how she escaped hell, piss off."

He shrugged, "I can't help with that."

She turned around to the books, and he continued, "But the librarian could."

Dyys rolled her eyes, and then she heard him in the background, calling for the librarian. Did the prince actually mean to help her? Maybe he could remember his debts. Remember what she

had to do just to keep him alive after he charged into a dwergaz ruin protected by a Wachterin.

“Yes, m’lord?”

Dyys heard the voice and spun around in confusion, “What the goddamn motherfucking kregstad is this!?”

The woman standing near the door was dressed in a simple suit, with a black bow tie. Her hair was a brilliant white, done up into a top-bun. Her eyes were vertically-slitted, like Dyys’. Except instead of glowing red with the power of a Fury, they glowed from an internal golden light.

Dyys stared in simultaneous shock and horror at the Hekate in front of her. A species she had hoped was long since wiped from this world. A species she had rained personal destruction down upon. Maybe that had been wrong. She had worked on the behalf of the usurper who took over Hell, at the time.

Dyys swallowed nervously, “Do you know what she is, princeling?”

Vanadreer shrugged casually, “My family historian. Selene has served my family for three hundred years, most of this library has been part of her own personal cultivation. Carmichael tried to assist, of course, but if it didn’t grant him immediate power, he tended not to be interested.”

Selene smiled sweetly, and bowed, causing Dyys to feel violently ill. How could a creature like this so casually move about? The mortal plainly thought she was nothing more than a mage, but the sickening sweetness of her blood was overpowering. Dyys could smell her from the other side of the room, and she knew the opposite was also true.

“Prince... Leave us.” Dyys instructed, and Vanadreer glanced between them, and finally saw Dyys’ hostility and ran for it.

The Hekate closed the doors quietly, and then sat on the arm of a chair, smiling sweetly, “How may I assist you? The library is my own, and I know it well. Though Carmichael has... Had, a habit of misplacing items.”

Dyys glared, “Kregstad. I’m a Fury. You’re a Hekate. How about we get around that, first?”

“Hekate?” The librarian asked, and smiled slowly, “Is that what I am? I don’t know it. I have often looked to find my heritage. I know my father was not human. My mother was, though she was killed shortly after my birth. I was found adrift at sea, locked in a coffin with my murdered mother.”

Dyys softened slowly, breathing more calmly, “Oh. So you don’t even know what you are.”

“You do.” Selene said, her sweet nature refusing to allow her a more serious posture, “Would you care to share it with me?”

Dyys scratched the side of her head, “That... Might not be the best idea. What I know of your kind might well be propaganda from the man who claimed to be my god. The man I killed. The man used by Ausosa.”

Selene shrugged, “You’ve given me a name. That might be enough to find something.”

“It won’t be.” Dyys smiled grimly, “The Furies wiped out your kind. We obliterated every evidence that you ever existed. We were the ones that hunted down your kind, like your father. We did our best to make sure nothing like you would ever exist. Apparently someone failed.”

Selene winced, “I... I have no done you no wrong.”

“I don’t hate you.” Dyys rolled her eyes, “Hero probably manipulated both our peoples. But every other time I’ve met a Hekate, they’ve been trying to kill me. Most have got close. This is the

first time I've been able to have a conversation."

Selene nodded slowly, "I'm sorry. I must bring up feelings you'd rather I didn't. What help can I give?"

"Ausosa." Dyys shrugged, "I know she was banished to hell at some point, and then at some point Hero freed her, and started to give her power. But I don't think she stayed in the Hall of the Hells. I'm looking for a trace. A place to start looking."

The librarian nodded, moving passed her to examine the scrolls. "The name is... Familiar. I think one of the old friars of Wrodin once recorded a list of Faen warriors, where that name appears."

"She is Fae." Dyys nodded.

Selene pulled a scroll from the shelf, "This one. Let me see..."

The librarian laid out the scroll on a lectern with exaggerated caution, barely unfurling it enough to read each line. "Yes, it's here. Written in Wyrddin. A list of Faen warriors, and their deeds... Ausosa, that which is the dawning light. She rose upon the battle and burned out the skies. She lifted up the dead so that the battle could be turned aside. Sorry, the references are mostly opaque."

Dyys laughed, "I speak Wyrddin. That's my native tongue. I know exactly how flowery it can be."

Selene smiled. Dyys was getting sick of seeing that smile on her face. That was one of the worst parts of the Hekate. They would smile sweetly at you as they carved out your heart. They never got angry or irritated. They smiled at the world, no matter what was happening. They smiled as they killed Fury hatchlings in their mother's arms.

"She is that which is the light and dark and the rising of the shadow beneath the mountain." Selene said slowly, "I'm sorry, I'm not sure how to translate that correctly. That's a word for word."

Dyys blinked, "That's something. She is the dawn, she's between Summer and Luna, and has their powers. Fel and light. But the mountain. That's something new. Anything in this friar's writings about mountains?"

"These are just recordings." Selene said, "He took common sayings of the time and compiled them. It is likely even he did not know what the shadow rising beneath the mountain actually was."

"Shadow rising means assassin." Dyys smiled, "I've been called the Shadow that Falls from the Heart, because I was a purifier, a torturer of souls."

Selene looked up, the slightest concern appearing on her face, "You were a torturer in the Hall of Hells?"

"My name is Dyys." She smiled, "I'm sure I appear in your books."

The Hekate's eyes widened just the smallest of fractions, and she nodded, "I see. Apologies, Lady Dyys."

"Just call me Dyys." She sighed, "Anything else, on Ausosa? Or an assassin of a mountain?"

"Little for the first query, too much for the second." Selene replied, "Many assassins in previous ages utilised the cover of mountains to hide the locations where they would recover, and hide from the enormous bounties that were placed on their heads."

Dyys frowned, "It might be possible that she was the first."

Selene nodded, and smiled at her, “If you could give me a day, or so, I may be able to find more in-depth correlations.”

Dyys ground her teeth, “I don’t want to be here. How about an hour? Then I’ll take whatever you have.”

“On one condition.”

Dyys looked at the Hekate, “What would that be?”

“That you allow me to accompany you. And that you will tell me of my people.”

There was the slightest hint of desperation to the voice. She wasn’t just a Hekate. She was part human. She probably didn’t even realise that her soul was eternal, that she would walk this world until she was killed. That there never had been an afterlife waiting for her. She felt things. Her ancestors had no emotions at all. They just smiled sweetly as they killed. They felt no love, and no hate. They were a race of pure logic. She wasn’t.

It scared Dyys to admit that the Hekate might actually be capable of anger.

“I’m not good company.” She said cautiously, “But the choice is yours. This kingdom is doomed. I’m sure the prince could use your assistance, what with Carmichael dead.”

The Hekate glanced at the dead man on the ground, and smiled, “Good riddance.”

Trei

He pushed aside the ruins of the door, stepping inside slowly. He knew someone or something was alive in here. It was the first survivor he'd found across the Evening Realms. All the realms. Ausosa had devastated all of them. Destroyed them with either Fel, or fire.

He crouched, looking at the ash, and smiled slowly, "She's gone."

There was a stirring, and a terrified feminine face poked out of the ash, "My king?"

Trei held out a hand and pulled them upright, "Talin. It's been a long time."

He'd first met them when he was being fitted for his wedding suit. Talin had been one of the assistants. Trei had been afraid that his presence would cause Talin to grab onto him, like so many others had in those early days, however, Talin wasn't attracted to males. He was born a female, but wasn't treated as one by the rest of the Fae, because he didn't think as one.

Trei smiled, patting off some of the dust, and Talin looked around in fear, "Did the queen survive? Will she save us?"

He closed his eyes, breathing to steady himself, "Summer is dead."

Talin burst into frightened tears. Trei couldn't blame him. Summer had been there, watching over the Fae, since the very beginning. The only one who had ever rivalled her was Janus, the Arbiter, who'd been killed by the Fates. That, or maybe undead Tyr qualified. Either way, the Fae were now defenceless. They might be stronger than most creatures in the 'verse, but Ausosa was stronger than everything. She controlled the lifestream itself.

Trei swallowed, "So is Faith."

Talin turned to him, bowing his head, "My king... I cannot imagine..."

"You're the first Fae I've found." Trei swallowed, "I need you, Talin. The gods are dead. I... I don't know what I'm doing. Looking for survivors... But surviving into what? Our entire world is dead."

Talin smiled up at him, wiping away tears, "We live. That's something. Isn't it?"

Trei clenched his fists, "If it means I get to kill Ausosa, I will keep living."

Talin stared at him in abject terror, "Ausosa is behind this?"

"Yes." Trei sighed heavily, "Talin... Do you know what happened? Back then? Why did Summer sentence her to hell? For resurrection? Summer resurrected me. Isn't it a bit... Hypocritical? That doesn't seem like Summer."

Talin frowned, "I... I guess I should. Talking about is a crime, my king. High treason. But... You need to know. Queen Summer should have been the one to tell you. I'm sorry if I hesitate, I am afraid."

Hesitating, or speaking with deference, was an insult amongst the Fae. All the same, many did when they spoke to Trei. Because of what he was. What he represented. They'd been scared enough of him when he was just a ghoul. Now he was a god. He might even be the only god left alive.

Talin looked at the sky, blinking back tears, "It was our first generation. We didn't know we could reincarnate, that we enter the lifestream when we die, and are then reborn. Ausosa and Tyr were newly married. They were bound to each other, by the Fates. Their love was seemingly perfect. We were all happy for them, even if walking into their presence meant observing them making out. They were in that stage of a romance."

Trei smiled. He and Summer had certainly been embarrassed enough times during that stage of their romance. Council members popping in to demand some legislation, only to pop out rather quickly again as Summer adjusted her clothes. He couldn't quite imagine the terror that was Tyr being like that, but there had to have been a life for that monster before he'd spent millennia trying to break his connection to the lifestream and finally die. Before he became timeless.

"Tyr died." Talin winced, "It wasn't just a death. If it was, we would have discovered reincarnation then and there. He was murdered. A violent death. It broke his soul. Apparently, their marriage wasn't flawless. Though she loved him, Tyr was cruel to Ausosa. She sought out comfort from a friend, and that comfort spiralled into an affair. That friend grew jealous, and hated the man who treated Ausosa so poorly. So he killed him."

Trei winced, "Oh. Ausosa was partly to blame. Tyr was also to blame. I guess that's why when Tyr came back... Ausosa didn't come running to him. She must have learned to hate him over the years."

Talin nodded, "Probably. Why did Ausosa come back?"

"She killed the gods." Trei shrugged, "I think that was the point. To wipe out all the gods who made the world that hurt her the way it did."

Talin breathed uncertainly, "There's a little more. The friend? I don't know the name. It was never made public, but I know they were sentenced to something for eternity. Not what, not where."

Trei nodded, "Ausosa might try to either kill or save them. It's a place to look."

"Claven was our historian." Talin shrugged, "She might know more."

"She's dead." Trei winced, "She was with Summer."

The small Fae's shoulders drooped, and Trei put an arm around him, squeezing gently, "I'm still here, Talin. We'll get through this. I won't abandon my people, even if that is just you. We'll find a new home. You're Fae. You will never be defeated."

Talin nodded silently, but Trei could feel the fear rolling off them. "Come on, I've got a dozen more realms to search, and they're beginning to disintegrate."

Without the ruling Fae to hold a realm together, it would fall apart. It was their magic that sustained the existence of the realms. Trei wasn't sure where he'd put the survivors. The mortal plane had already been invaded a number of times, and probably wouldn't welcome anymore refugees. On the other hand, there were Faen ruins there. The Fae could retake a place they'd called home before they abandoned humanity to its own self-destruction.

Antoinette

She tossed the crystal in her hand idly, as she sat on the edge of the fortress wall. Only a short time ago, she would have been appalled at the idea of magic. She had been, when she'd used it to heal Mytris. She'd hated herself for it.

That story had changed, gradually, slowly. As she came to understand what magic was. That was a channel of power coming from the lifestream. To touch magic, was to touch the divine. That could still be viewed as heresy, if it wasn't Sarin herself who had taught her how to use it. It was a gift, freely given. . . Because a long time ago, the world had been destroyed when the First People stole magic from the gods. The gods wouldn't repeat that mistake.

The crystal was empty. She'd used up what tiny amount of magic she'd managed to store in it over the months. She didn't have many sources of magic available to her. Fewer, since the calamity. Now. . . With the gods gone, there might be none at all. None that were safe to touch, anyway. Stored magic had been unaffected by the Fel, but she knew the dangers of that corrupt magic more than most.

It was Shannon who had cured Kru of it, fighting a god in single combat. Standing against her as nothing but a mortal. A healer. She had a handful of miracles, and no magic of her own, and yet Shannon had been able to fight a god, and win. Not by killing, but by healing. That was the woman Antoinette had fallen for. Kind, beyond measure. Willing to sacrifice everything, but not willing to destroy.

In the end, Shannon had been destroyed. Killed by the violent fury that was part of this world. Part of the endless tale of the rise and fall of gods. Killed simply because she dared to serve.

The gods were gone. It was time the world learned to live without them. If that meant the end of days, then it meant the end of days. Antoinette didn't care. What she cared about was making sure that Shannon's sacrifice would mean something. Anything. She couldn't just be another victim of the gods in-fighting. She wouldn't fight the gods. She wouldn't bring violence against them. But she would end them.

She would destroy the shrines. Melt them down, kick them to pieces. Whatever it took. They didn't deserve to be remembered. Didn't deserve to be worshipped. They hadn't protected this world, they were the danger in it. In a war of gods, it was only humanity that lost.

She tucked the crystal away, looking quietly at the horizon, and the villagers harvesting the overnight-grown crops the gods had gifted them in exchange for bringing the immense danger of all of them gathered in a single location. At least some good had come of this. Some people would survive. Survive and remember how the gods had failed to save them.

She needed something else if she was going to do this. The shrines in the city would be easy to find, but there were others. Many others. Hidden in valleys, caves and atop mountains. The gods had made the shrines themselves, before they created the races that would end up worshipping them. Failed attempts to recreate the First People, but to strip away some attribute the gods found undesirable.

If the gods had been trying to create a race as brilliant as the First People, but without the rebellious streak, then whoever was responsible for the creation of humanity had utterly failed. Humanity would rise up. They always had. They didn't like being treated like trash. First the gods burned their skies, and now they abandoned them. It wouldn't take long before people began destroying the shrines without her help.

It was the hidden ones she needed to focus on. Magic would be the easy answer, but not with the Fel bleeding through the lifestream and into everything. The crops in front of her were already beginning to die. They should have remained fresh until they were picked, but it was already over. The Fel was part of them, now. Part of life itself. It would turn people against each other.

Antoinette sighed. There was no saving anybody from the Fel, now. It was part of the makeup of the world, or would be. There was no way to avoid that. Cleaning the lifestream wasn't possible. Fighting the woman who tainted it, wasn't possible. The only way forward, the only way to help anyone, was to weaken their connection to the lifestream. She couldn't cut it off. That would kill them all.

Maybe, if she pulled humanity away from the gods, she might slow the spread of the Fel.

In memory of the woman who had cured it.

"What are you doing, sister?"

She looked over at the soldier walking up the stairs, and shrugged, "Thinking. Praetor."

The soldier turned up her nose, "I've resigned. I'm a nobody. Call me, Aurili."

Antoinette laughed, standing up and stepping onto the solid path, "Call me Antoinette. I resigned too."

Aurili raised an eyebrow, "Are your vows not for life?"

Antoinette sighed, "Vows to who? Sarin is dead and buried. Her shrines are just a mockery, encouraging people to reach out to the bitch who killed everyone else."

The white-eyed woman nodded quietly, and leaned on the wall, looking out to the horizon silently. She was quiet, and reserved. This was the person that Lilibeth had mentioned, that Meria had tried so hard to set up right before they all died. Some of the gods had known what was coming. She didn't know how clearly they'd seen it, but they'd tried to give their champions one last moment of happiness before they died.

She could remember one of the scenes in the dining room, after it had all ended. After she stopped crying over Shannon, and tried to search for survivors. She'd found an elf, and an older man, holding hands, tears in both their eyes. They'd been killed nearly instantly, or the elf had. The man wore every sign of magical burnout. He'd drawn too much power, trying to save her, and had killed himself.

"I'm going to destroy the shrines." Antoinette whispered, almost hoping the woman wouldn't hear her.

The soldier shrugged, "That's as good a goal as any. Not like there's much of a world left to fight over. Zanfir will conquer this entire continent. Serving a dead goddess. Without the gods... Things will break down. Worse than the calamity. Goodbye food, and water. Even the plague rats will die. I thought you were considering killing yourself, sitting on the edge like that... I wouldn't blame anyone if they killed themselves. Honestly, it seems the logical way out of this."

Antoinette winced, "Being absorbed into the Fel isn't some escape. It's horror. That's what they'll face when they die. The Void, and the Fel. Death is no escape anymore, Aurili."

The soldier turned to her, "You think breaking things will help?"

"Maybe." Antoinette shrugged, "Either way. Humanity needs to know the gods are gone. That they won't help us. That they saw this coming, and did nothing to stop it."

Aurili nodded, and turned back to the horizon. “I teased her. That was the last thing I said to Lilibeth, before she died. I told her she’d have to wait to see if I was serious, or was still angry at her.”

Antoinette leaned next to her, shoulders touching gently, “Shannon and I pretended we weren’t a couple. Badly, but we never really let the wider world see it. We hid it, because everyone are dicks. I regret it. So much.”

Aurili didn’t move, tears falling from her strong face slowly. “I never shared anything with Lilibeth. Just the understanding that we cared for each other.”

She didn’t say anything to that. She couldn’t make it any better. The soldier had given up her life for a vow that now meant nothing at all. Given up any chance at what may or may not have been a long-lasting relationship. She hadn’t taken the risk, so there was no way to tell if it was worth it. Aurili would be assuming it would have been perfect, in a way reality couldn’t reflect, making the pain all the worse.

“Fuck the gods.” Aurili growled, punching the stonework.

The soldier turned to her, “What’s your first target?”

Aurili

Antoinette might be misguided, she might even have no idea what she was doing. It was obvious she'd barely thought through what she wanted to do, but Aurili had been a commander of a legion. She knew what needed to happen to achieve a goal. She was more than happy to throw herself into this mission, headfirst.

If she hadn't encountered the woman, she'd probably have ended up in mercenary work. She needed something to do. Clear aims, clear goals. Something to kill. She wanted orders. A way to take the responsibility away from her. She'd had enough of the entire world riding on her shoulders.

She swung the saddle over her horse, patting Finnia's neck and smiling reassuringly. The horse wasn't buying it. She could tell that Aurili was upset. That wasn't about to change. Finnia would just have to get used to it.

"Praetor. Please." The soldier behind her asked, one hand on his sword. He'd been ordered to stop her leaving. To make her come back to the castle and play the dutiful servant to the asshole prince.

"Soldier, I'm sorry." She sighed, "But I am not staying here."

"You're abandoning your post, abandoning us. The Legion." The man said desperately, "None of us want to see you get hurt. Can't you see what's happening? We need you, praetor. We've already lost one. Don't make us lose the other."

Aurili's elbow smacked into his mouth before he could draw his sword, knocking him off his feet. She planted a solid foot on the centre of his chest. Leather armour was great for moving around in, not so great for preventing death by crushing. She glared down at him, "There is no legion anymore. A legion exists to defend a kingdom. This kingdom is dead. A dying king, an idiot prince, and an invading army that outnumbers you at an indefensible scale. Balavid is over. The gods are dead, soldier. This world is dead. Move on."

She turned and swung up onto her horse, and began to move for the exit. She heard the irritating voice of the idiot prince instantly. "Archers!"

Usually, this would be a considerable threat to her. Instead, she coaxed Finnia into a walk and began slowly moving for the exit road. She reached down and pulled Antoinette onto the saddle behind her easily as they moved through the gate.

The woman frowned, "Aren't we just going to get shot?"

Aurili grinned and shook her head, "Not today. Today is the day the prince realises why I was leading his army."

She flicked a piece of stone against the wall as they began to move through the entryway, sparking off a barely visible fuse she'd laid earlier that day. A fuse that lead to the banks of barrels beneath the wall. Barrels filled with a waterproof explosive.

The familiar putrid scent exploded out behind them along with the screams. She felt Antoinette jerk in shock as she kicked Finnia into a gallop. She'd distracted them, but it wouldn't take them long to want to respond. The sister was probably dealing with some sort of guilt over the people they'd just hurt. It didn't matter to Aurili. If the soldiers were caught in the flames, then they had absolutely failed to take her training seriously.

"Why is the fire green!?" Antoinette yelled from behind her.

Before she could answer an arrow hit the ground in front of them. Aurili swung herself to the

side of Finnia, so she was facing backwards and barely hanging off the horse. She grabbed her bow from the edge of the saddle, and breathed calmly, timing her shot to the movements of the horse. She let loose three quick shots. Just intimidation shots, she wasn't aiming to cause damage.

She put the bow back and swung back into the seat, wheel Finnia suddenly on a new angle, hoping that the archers would take the hint.

Antoinette leaned in, yelling over the wind, "They're still shooting at us!"

Aurili winced, "Can't you do anything about it?"

"I don't have any magic!" Antoinette replied loudly. That was a shock to the system. A Sister of Sarin who knew magic? Maybe things really had been changing under the leadership of the High Priestess.

Aurili fumbled with her belt as she steered Finnia with her legs, trying not to cringe as another arrow shot overhead, too close for comfort. She passed it backward. There was a gemstone in the centre of the belt, concealed. She'd kept it around not because she could use magic, but for the mages she inevitably had to end up saving as praetor. Usually Carmichael after he recklessly wasted all his magic knocking down a single barrier, forgetting there was a fight beyond it.

"Inghros bhowmi skoitom!" Antoinette shouted. Aurili felt the surge, like she had ever since that day Wrodin had chosen her as his servant. She felt the magic, and knew it was working. She also knew that magic was disappointingly short lived, and aimed for the gap in the hills ahead. They'd have a moment to breathe there, until the prince sent out riders. She was hoping he wasn't so stupid as to waste lives that way, but he wasn't the idiot prince for nothing.

Finnia whinnied as they pulled into the shadows. The praetor swung down from the horse, intending to grab her bow when she saw Antoinette go limp and tumble from the horse. She leapt to grab her, and sighed as she laid her down gently on the ground. Not the most skilled mage, then. She shouldn't have been surprised at that. No sister would be experienced with magic. Yet, the blonde had used magic that Aurili barely recognised. It was an old style of magic that she'd only seen Carmichael use once, and he'd suggested it was something only a master could use. It wouldn't surprise her if he had been exaggerating, but it had taxed the wizard more than most.

Maybe it was just an exhausting style of magic.

She grabbed her bow, placing the quiver on her shoulder, and moved onto the other side of the hill opening. She felt her eyes focus and she looked across the field, seeing with detail she shouldn't be able to. The gate was closed, and the flames were almost doused. That was the good news. The bad news was three riders moving in her direction.

The arrow knocked against the drawstring as she pulled it back at arms length effortlessly. She watched the flags atop the fortress, using them to see how the arrow would drift. She aimed up slightly and to the left, and let loose the single shot. The arrow drifted almost lazily through the air, before slamming with violent force into the right shoulder of the lead rider, almost dismounting him.

It didn't discourage them. All three kept going towards her. She'd delivered enough warnings. If they were this committed to suicide, she wouldn't stop them. She drew another arrow and aimed.

A hand touched her shoulder, and she saw Antoinette, her green eyes glaring at her, "Don't kill them."

Aurili glared back at her, "How do you suggest we stop them?"

The woman held up the gemstone from the belt, "This still has a small charge left. Aim it directly in front of the lead rider."

Then the sister cupped her hands around the stone, and whispered, “Telsus kado.”

She swayed weakly and held the stone out to Aurili, who took it without fully understanding what the woman had done to it. She’d said to aim it in front of the lead rider. Aurili attached the stone as best she could to the centre of an arrow haft, using some twine she pulled off the top of one of her boots. She breathed as she sighted the arrow. This would be harder. The arrow’s flight would be erratic, and it was much heavier now, it wouldn’t go the distance.

The bow twanged and the arrow shot into the air, suddenly falling in front of the group of the riders who were now getting uncomfortably close. Aurili winced, holding up a hand as there was a flash of light as the arrow hit the ground. She felt it from here, the ground shaking, and the surge of magical energy. As she blinked away the dots in her vision, she saw the riders wheeling around, a massive chasm splitting the ground in front of them - too large to jump.

Aurili grinned, grabbing the sister and both mounted Finnia. She pulled the sister’s tired hands around her waist as she took off at a gallop again. Antoinette had bought them some time, if nothing else. Whatever it took to discourage the riders into leaving them alone, and going back to the prince empty-handed.

She felt the sister slump against her, and held tight to the hands at her waist. She’d passed out again. This couldn’t be healthy.

Alfar

“No.” Alfar pouted, crossing her arms and pushing the bowl of food away. Opposite her another Sibyl rolled her eyes, “Oh come off it. Why are you being so pissy, Alfar?”

“You know why.” She said and stuck out her tongue.

The other rolled her eyes, “We shared a vision, of Antoinette’s death. It can be avoided. Are you surprised the others wanted your help? You see better than most of us do.”

“Don’t care.” Alfar growled, her bottom lip shaking. They didn’t understand. None of them ever understood why it was so hard for her. They thought it was easy to see every moment of every time, to see passed the illusion of time. It was maddening. She just wanted to hug her dog.

She didn’t want to have to see how every reality was about to collapse, over and over. Didn’t want to have to watch Tyr kill Trei in almost every timeline. Didn’t want to watch Ashwen tear open Yio’s throat. Break her neck. Kick in her face.

She still saw them. It was hard to remain happy. She knew everything that was happening, everything that could happen, and she could see why they were happening. It wasn’t fair. Why couldn’t she just play?

“You need to eat.” Alteo sighed, “You haven’t eaten in three days. You’ve forgotten.”

Alfar blinked, “I ate tomorrow. Tea and biscuits with the Fae who isn’t the Fae. I’ll be fine.”

“Biscuits is not enough, and tomorrow is not today. You are not about to go days without eating when we need your insight more than ever.” Alteo replied.

Alfar stuck out her tongue and looked down at the bowl of porridge. She didn’t like it. She disliked grains. They grew so slowly and looked so weird. Grinding them up took forever. They always grew back.

“Honey.”

Alteo stared at her, “There is no honey in the kingdom. There are no bees. They took flight after the calamity. A side-effect of the barrier.”

“There was honey a year ago.” Alfar pouted, sticking out her bottom lip. She curled up her fists, “No. No honey tomorrow. No honey yesterday. Sorry.”

Alteo grinned and ate a spoonful from her own bowl, “I know. It’s hard for you. To remember.”

“Arranging memories of time is like sifting flowers for their taste.” Alfar rolled her eyes, “Only the Fae would bother to do it.”

Alteo laughed, “In your case, it might be prudent to try it once in a while.”

“Garmr doesn’t like it when I do.” Alfar shook her head, “He thought I was boring the next time I try. I like Garmr. He’s nice.”

Alteo shivered, “Your demon dog tried to eat another of the horses this morning. Any idea why that was?”

Alfar scratched her head, “He did eat it. He will. He was acting out when he did it. Misses his walk.”

“Can you walk him, then?”

“We were interrupted.” Alfar replied, and indicated the doors as they burst open, a Sibyl running full tilt towards them. She skidded to a stop, breathing hard, “First Sibyl, Second. Apologies.

The council has called an emergency session. Ships have been spotted on the horizon. An invasion fleet.”

“Zanfir.” Alfar grinned, “They were arriving yesterday. They love her. They love her so much that they didn’t be happy. They were sad at the grave when they heard it.”

Alteo stood up slowly, “Zanfir is invading? They were just a flyspit city state last I heard. I know we don’t hear about the West Continent much, but how?”

“The islands.” Alfar nodded, “The islands between the continents, that they share. Many rocks grow there. Grow by the years. Pretty rocks. All sparkly. I like them. I think you like them too. But you’ll be annoyed.”

Alteo sighed, “So, is this the reason you can’t walk your demon dog? What do you need to say to the council?”

“Mishia died when she tried to stop them. They love the Fae who’s so angry and cute. So cute when she’s mad. Burning eyes of red and black. Makes me want to kiss her nose.” Alfar clapped.

Alteo sighed, “Fine. Twentieth Sibyl Astral, please inform the stables that Garmr is about to eat a horse, and they’ll probably not be able to stop him. Alfar, walk with me to the council.”

“I already will have.” Alfar pouted.

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Alteo laughed, “In your case, it might be prudent to try it once in a while.”

“Garmr doesn’t like it when I do.” Alfar shook her head, “He thought I was boring the next time I try. I like Garmr. He’s nice.”

Alteo shivered, “Your demon dog tried to eat another of the horses this morning. Any idea why that was?”

Alfar scratched her head, “He did eat it. He will. He was acting out when he did it. Misses his walk.”

“Can you walk him, then?”

“We were interrupted.” Alfar replied, and indicated the doors as they burst open, a Sibyl running full tilt towards them. She skidded to a stop, breathing hard, “First Sibyl, Second. Apologies. The

council has called an emergency session. Ships have been spotted on the horizon. An invasion fleet.”

“Zanfir.” Alfar grinned, “They were arriving yesterday. They love her. They love her so much that they didn’t be happy. They were sad at the grave when they heard it.”

Alteo stood up slowly, “Zanfir is invading? They were just a flyspit city state last I heard. I know we don’t hear about the West Continent much, but how?”

“The islands.” Alfar nodded, “The islands between the continents, that they share. Many rocks grow there. Grow by the years. Pretty rocks. All sparkly. I like them. I think you like them too. But you’ll be annoyed.”

Alteo sighed, “So, is this the reason you can’t walk your demon dog? What do you need to say to the council?”

“Mishia died when she tried to stop them. They love the Fae who’s so angry and cute. So cute when she’s mad. Burning eyes of red and black. Makes me want to kiss her nose.” Alfar clapped.

Alteo sighed, “Fine. Twentieth Sibyl Astral, please inform the stables that Garmr is about to eat a horse, and they’ll probably not be able to stop him. Alfar, walk with me to the council.”

“I already will have.” Alfar pouted.

Dyys

She lounged in the chair, eating a bread roll and drawing runes in the air idly. She was bored, and tired, but she felt strangely at peace. There was still a quiet anger and darkness burning beneath it all, but it was in the background. She was currently content with how things were going. She had a chance to find and kill Ausosa. She was happy with that. She'd half expected every path of progress to end up being blocked.

"Demon!" Aaron shouted walking in, "I need your help."

Dyys glared at him, "I'll only say this one more time. I am not a demon. I am a Fury."

The prince clenched his fists, "Whatever. Praetor Aurili has deserted. I need you to find her, and bring her back here."

Dyys considered his red face, and the complete absence of calm from his demeanour. She flicked one of the runes in front of her. The prince was knocked out of the room by a gust of wind, and the door locked itself.

Selene giggled from over where she was reading, "The prince isn't going to let that go."

Dyys shrugged, biting into her roll again. It didn't much matter if he did or didn't. There wasn't a lot he could do about it. All he could do was piss her off, and then find out just how powerful a Fury could be. Find out how destructive the Fel was trying to make her as it bled into what was left of her soul.

She hadn't come back intact when Bel had resurrected her. She was a lich. A piece of a soul. Insanity, hatred, and violence were inevitable for people in her position. Adding the Fel infecting magic atop of that, and the usual violent demeanour of her people, and it added up to a bleak outlook for her life. She didn't have much time. A few weeks, and then Ausosa would be able to own her the moment she put any focus to it.

The door shook as something slammed into it. Dyys stood up, walking over to the Hekate, trying not to vomit at the scent. "Any progress?"

"A little." Selene sighed, "I've found a few aliases. They might be Ausosa, or heroes associated with her, throughout a difficult period in the history of a nation known as Solas. They still exist today, but far smaller than they were. They once ruled over half the continent, and apparently traded with other worlds through the use of something I'm roughly translating as Gateway."

"Solas." Dyys frowned, "Wasn't their capital built over the Faen ruins? I'm pretty sure I used to live there. We called the city Dawning Light."

Selene smiled, "Yes. Yes, that translation would fit. There are three figures that seem to be associated strongly with Ausosa who came from the city. I guess the name is a giveaway."

Dyys shrugged, "Probably. But the city has been gone for generations. How does it help?"

The door clattered weakly as the hinges began to give way. Dyys flicked a wrist, shifting an empty bookshelf to lean on it.

Selene shrugged, "Two of the figures were supposedly immortal, and also founders of Be Liphu, the port of Solas."

Dyys frowned, "That's a bastardisation of Wyrddin. The Light."

The librarian nodded at her, "That's my reading of it as well. We might find something at Be Liphu that could suggest a next move in finding Ausosa."

Dyys stood up, “Well, you wanted to come. Are you packed?”

The woman blinked in surprise, “I have a spare set of clothes in my room.”

Dyys focused, spreading out feelers through the tainted magical matrix. She flinched as it reached into her, coiling up around her heart. She coughed, black tar spraying from her mouth, and then the bag dropped out of the air in front of her. The Fury wiped her mouth with irritation. She hadn’t expected the Fel to act so quickly, especially not for something as pathetic as a finder spell.

Selene looked at her sweetly, “Are you okay, Fury?”

“You’re looking at your future.” Dyys spat, trying to clean the foul taste out of her mouth, “You’re part magic too, Hekate.”

The creature was incapable of appearing concerned, but she was quiet as she picked up her bag, and slung it across her back. She didn’t say anything, or ask any questions, which was a welcome relief.

Dyys glanced at the doors that were definitely about to give in, and opened the shift and channel. She fell to her knees, vomiting tar violently. She punched the ground. She hadn’t even had any warning that time. “Go, already.”

Selene smiled at her, and stepped into the shimmer in the air.

Dyys crawled up and touched the shimmer, feeling the channel grab her and drag her through. She tumbled soundlessly through the endless dark of the Void, feeling the walls of the channel directing her essence. It was quiet in the Void. A silence she appreciated after so much that had happened. If it weren’t for the burning in her chest from the Fel, she might even be able to enjoy it.

There were no pinpricks of light in the Void, not anymore. No sign that the gods had ever dwelt here. When the worlds finally gave in and collapsed, it would be this endless, noiseless darkness that they would return to. The Void had existed before Kao had. In a way, the goddess of chaos had been forced to exist, to counter the endless order of the infinite emptiness. Maybe once everything ended, a new world would rise, with new gods. Maybe this was the only shot that had it.

Either way, Dyys swore by Bel’s memory that Ausosa would die before the worlds did. That she would die in pain, regretting everything she had done.

The Fury crashed out onto stonework streets, and coughed violently. The putrid black tar ran slowly from her mouth down to the ground in front of her, and she staggered upright, “Kregstad. That hurt. Selene?”

The woman smiled at her from nearby, but she really shouldn’t have been smiling. A half-dozen spears were touching her throat. Town guards, surprised by the sudden arrival of two people were very clearly not human. Demons, in their minds.

Dyys sighed as she felt a spear jut at the back of her head, “Hello, boys. Just here to see the ruins. This is Urmobia, isn’t it?”

A man in a suit, wearing white gloves, approached slowly, “A magical creature. Curious. Take it to the arena. Purify it.”

She did not like the sound of that. Not remotely. Yet, in her current weakened condition, she didn’t particularly like her chances of fighting back. She glanced at Selene, who was holding up her wrists to willingly be bound. Infuriating. Of course the Hekate would choose not to fight. Because it was the right thing to do.

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Trei

He hadn't found anyone else. Talin might be the only Fae left alive. He'd hoped that Astrian would survive, but he'd felt her death. He'd hurt her, hurt her badly enough she'd run away from the Faen realms. Unable to stand hearing about him, because she imprinted on him, lovely wholly and completely without reservation, but he did not love her. It had hurt when Astrian left, but he'd understood.

Ausosa just added another crime to a long list. Astrian's death probably hadn't even meant anything to her. It meant something to Trei. Four women had imprinted on him as the 'verse struggled to deal with his existence. Four women who were now all dead. Dead because of their connection to him. Dead because he existed.

Teasing Yio, who had thought it best to introduce herself naked, before knocking him out of his body, to teach him a skill he would need to beat Tyr. She had been cruel, as had her sisters. Yet, in the end, he'd understood why they'd done what they had.

Dark Luna, who was violent and angry all the time. The warrior who had completely embarrassed herself by shifting into his room whilst he was still changing. She'd seen more than she intended to, but less than she always suggested to Summer. She had probably been the most jealous of the group, able to feel when he did things from a massive distance. She'd shifted from her own realm when she felt him kiss Summer. At least Luna had found some sort of happiness with Claven, even if every time the two of them saw him he got tangled up again in their emotions.

Reserved Astrian, who never asked for anything above her station. She was a servant of Summer, and saw herself as it. Yet, it was she who'd managed to call to Trei across the Void. She'd given her life, burning herself out to be reborn as a Faeling, just to bring him back. A terrifying child who tossed nightmares into the skulls of her enemies and made them kill themselves just to escape her wrath. A child who had still been imprinted on him, in the most awkward of manners. He'd given her back her adulthood, when he resurrected her. However, he'd also abandoned her in Calis, with his mother. He never came to say goodbye, and she never tried to find him.

Brilliant Summer, the light of his life. Fierce, and brave and intelligent. A woman who had nearly burned herself out, touching the lifestream, just to try and save Trei from the people lining up to put him back in the ground. The woman who had accidentally brought him back to life, kickstarting everything that had happened. A sneeze, with ramifications that had changed the fundamentals of the 'verse. He missed her teasing smile as she called him an idiot.

Trei had been created as a weapon to destroy the gods. It looked like Ausosa had finally succeeded in fulfilling her husband's dreams for him.

Talin looked around with awe, his wings tucked tightly against his back, "So this is the mortal world, is it?"

Trei nodded tiredly, sitting in the chair, still brooding, staring at the black liquid in front of him without drinking it. He had thought he wanted it. Something to keep his mind calm, and quiet. But he didn't. He wanted Summer back. He wanted his daughter back. He wanted Ausosa dead. That was it. There was nothing else that he wanted in the entire 'verse. He knew two of them were impossible, so he'd settle for the last. He'd settle for sticking Ausosa's head on a pike.

Talin frowned, "Where are we, exactly?"

Trei flicked his wrist, a map appearing in the air in front of the excitable Fae, "Namatay. A border town, between Yurk and Solas. I have a house here, a sort of escape from the Evening Realms

that Summer and I set up. They're seen a fair bit of both of us, so a Fae shouldn't draw too much attention. We're on the main trade route from Sothuot and Urmobia though, so try not to appear too obvious. Solas has outlawed magic."

Talin looked over the map, and then looked up in confusion, "What? Solas? That... Wasn't Solas founded by Summer and Luna?"

"Yes." Trei smiled, "That's the problem. Too many inexperienced wizards seeking power. Idiots who dealt with things way over their heads, causing destruction and death. The people got sick of it. Mages are hunted down and tortured to death. They call it purification."

The Fae sighed heavily, nibbling on the sunflower that was clearly meant to be a decoration and not food, "I guess we're lucky we're in Yurk, then."

Trei put the map away with another flick. It felt strange. He could still use his power, but it wasn't connected to the lifestream, not anymore. That had rejected him outright after it realised it couldn't taint him. He'd been dead once. He wasn't about to let himself be converted into a ghoulish again. Without the lifestream, he didn't know how powerful he really was. By everything he understood, he shouldn't have any magic at all. Yet he did, pure and clean.

"What do you plan to do next, Talin?"

The Fae shrugged, looking glumly at the tea in front of him, "I don't know. I've been trying not to think about it. My home is gone. My master is gone. I was a tailor's apprentice. I'm not some heroic figure. I don't think it will be easy to be accepted here, or anywhere else. I'm not just Fae. Humans are... Backwards. They have so much concern for outward appearance. Would they accept me as I am? Or try and force me to be a woman? What is a woman even allowed to do here?"

"Yurk is one of the worst." Trei sighed heavily, "They still have slavery. Women are the property of the men. Either their father, their husband, or the state. They wouldn't see you the way you see yourself. They will be cruel."

The Fae nodded, and frowned, "Can we go somewhere else?"

"Where?" Trei shrugged, "The other realms are gone. Eldrasa and the Burning Realms were already dead. The Hall of Hells will now be collapsing, if they haven't already. Whichever human nation you go to, you will be rejected. Either for being Fae, or for your perspective about yourself. It was a death sentence in Ozandius until recently, and at least they had outlawed slavery. At least in this city people will know to leave you alone. No one wants to be repeat what happened after someone tried to attack Summer."

That had been an incident. They'd tried to stab her whilst she was feeding Faith. Do not irritate a woman trying to deal with a fussy toddler, least of all to try and threaten her life. Especially don't do so when she's one of the most powerful beings in existence. It had taken the street cleaners a week to clean up the mess.

Talin winced, "You're leaving."

Trei glared at his coffee angrily, causing it to boil, "Ausosa is somewhere out there, still."

"I need you, my king." Talin said, voice wavering. He couldn't blame him. It was true enough. Only one Fae of thousands left alive. The Fae were social. They didn't mix well with the other races due to their arrogance, and the way other species wanted to exploit their dust for magical power. If he left Talin here alone, someone would exploit him. Someone would attack him, eventually. This might be the safest environment Trei could provide, but it wasn't safe.

Trei sighed, "I can't take you to fight Ausosa, you'll die. And I can't leave Summer and Faith's

murderer out there. Those are my choices, Talin. I know they suck. So does the 'verse. Look around you, everyone is starving. Coffee is one of the most expensive items on the menu. My infinite supply of gold isn't enough to help these people. They need food. They need crops that will actually grow. Except the matrix is now infected with the Fel. Any attempt to use magic to help anyone, and we'll ruin it. Grow the crops and they'll die. Heal the land, and it'll become worse than it was before. Magic is useless, now. These people are going to die. You are going to die. There's nothing I can do about it."

The Fae nodded sheepishly, trying not to cry. Maybe surviving was bad luck, rather than good, for Talin. He was certainly the most likely Fae to have problems in another realm. Trei had difficulty reading his thoughts, which wasn't completely unusual. Astrian was the best, and Luna had been a close second. He hadn't exactly practised the skill. All the same, Talin's thoughts were a terrifying dizzy of complex emotions, leaping from one extreme to another. He didn't know if this was the trauma of watching a world burn out, or just their everyday pattern. But it did mean Trei didn't have the slightest idea how to reassure him.

He stood up, "Let me show you the house, to start with. I haven't made my decision."

Talin reluctantly followed. No, it wasn't reluctance. It was shell shock. Just following along quietly, looking like they were hesitating because they were barely aware of the world around them. He'd found them cowering in the dust of the dead. Talin had watched his entire race get vaporised. Expecting anything more than a hollow reaction was expecting too much. Talin might well never recover from this. It was unfair to expect recovery.

Trei tossed a handful of coins behind him for the crowd. It wasn't much of a help, but it was something. A meaningless gesture to ease his conscience. To make him feel less guilty, knowing that he was the cause of all this. None of it would have been possible if he had never been born. If Tyr and Vastras had tried to forge him.

The house wasn't far away. They'd selected it for the proximity to the cafe. In fact, the owner had placed sunflowers on the tables after Summer became his favourite customer. She was always sweet, generous, and remembered each and every waiter and their stories. She was a queen, she knew how to deal with people.

The man himself ran out, "Trei."

He turned, steeling himself for the question, "Yes, Henri?"

"Is Summer okay? You've never come without her or Faith before."

He wasn't ready for the question. It hit him like a sucker punch to the gut. He'd known that was exactly what the man would ask, and all the same he wasn't prepared to answer it.

Trei leaned on a table, struggling to breathe, and Henri moved in close, putting a hand on his back, "I'm sorry. It's bad, isn't it?"

"They're... Dead." Trei managed before the tears starting flowing. He wiped at them angrily. He didn't want to cry. He wanted to stay strong. To let the world see him standing strong, just hellbent on ending the woman who had done it.

Henri let out a choked sound, "Dead? How? With you... And Summer... Oh gods. Faith is dead? She was just a child."

Trei couldn't answer. His throat felt like it was caught in a vice. Talin stepped up quietly, "Something catastrophic happened, sir. We're still trying to deal with it. To find out the scale. I'm sorry. There is no softening this blow. Most of the gods are also gone."

Henri stared in horror at the both of them, “Trei... Gods... How did you survive?”

“I was... Lucky.” He said with hesitation. He didn’t believe it for a moment. If Ausosa had wanted him dead, he would have died in that moment. She had allowed him to live. Allowed him to suffer, because Tyr had suffered. This was part of her revenge.

Henri smiled weakly, brushing away a frightened tear, “Whatever you need, Trei. We’re here for you. Remember that.”

Trei looked at the human, a man who was something that he used to be. A something that he continued to pretend to be. This was what it meant to be human. To have hope. At that moment, the false hope was represented in Trei, who didn’t have a hope in hell of actually succeeding in doing what the man wanted. The gods weren’t coming back. “Thank you, Henri. I’m doing what I can.”

Talin took his arm diplomatically, and began leading him away again. Trei let him, even if he knew that some of the crowd was wondering if he was cheating on Summer. They’d see that Talin was born a girl, clear as day. The man didn’t try and hide it, which was fine by Trei.

Antoinette

She woke up with a start, drenched in cold sweat. She cringed as she wiped the drool plastered halfway across her hair and tried to detangle her fringe from the ick.

“You’re awake.”

She looked over tiredly, “Aurili. Right. Are they still chasing us?”

“Yes.” The ex-praetor nodded slowly, “But they’ve camped for the night on the other side of the mountains. We’re just passed the pass, about halfway to Farves.”

Antoinette looked around the cave. It wasn’t much, just large enough to shelter from the wind. Aurili had lit a fire, crackling warmly. Outside there was snow falling. Of all things. The weather system was royally screwed.

“Sorry.” She sighed, “Magic is hard for me. Sarin was teaching me. I’ve only got a couple spells in me.”

The blonde laughed, “I don’t think it’s you. Carmichael struggled to use that kind of magic. I think Sarin was hazing you. Or trying to be useful.”

Antoinette frowned, “Yes and no? This kind of magic does take more out of you, but it also uses less magic overall. Which is kinda important for someone like me who struggles to get their hand on any magic.”

The woman nodded, “I guess. We don’t have any more for you to use. Hopefully we can pick up some in Farves tomorrow. I think I can mislead our followers that we’re headed north to Urran, but I don’t plan to cross the border that way.”

Antoinette tried to remember the maps of Balavid she’d studied on her way down from Ozandius, “There’s a tiny port town, isn’t there?”

“Hardly a town.” Aurili laughed, “A dozen people, and four or five shacks. But, Seha Roz is on the main trade route. If we can catch a boat heading north, it’ll take us Nal’farah.”

“We can’t leave yet.” Antoinette shook her head, “There’s two shrines in Balavid still. At Hegan, and Fashardan.”

Aurili shook her head as well, “No way. Not with the guards trailing us. Those are on the other side of the river. We’d have to head back to Fugan, or cross at Gorke. Both take us within sight of the palace. We can’t escape attention that easily.”

“There’s another way.” Antoinette smiled, “The Gateway.”

“Gateway?” Aurili asked in confusion. That surprised Antoinette. She would have thought that all Balavidians would know about the stories.

“Before Balavid was Balavid, it was part of a network of Gateways crossing the continent. Supposedly built by the Fae, or the gods. Probably the same thing to early humanity. Anyway, they linked everywhere. Not many have been found, but one was found here.”

Aurili frowned, “Where? If it was, wouldn’t Carmichael have found it?”

“The other side of the Gateway is underwater.” Antoinette shrugged, “At Basharay.”

Aurili swallowed nervously, “That’s on the Mishia side of the Great Lake. Ozandius might give you shelter, but Mishia is no friend to either of us. Their borders are closed.”

Antoinette nodded, “I know. I was a Princess of Yurk before I was a Sister of Sarin. I know

politics. There's a ferry from Basharay to Arian. Not officially, but it does exist. We'll have to bribe someone, and hope the prince hasn't sent out bounties already. If he has... Bribing them won't be easy. I only have a handful of gold."

Aurili nodded, "It would help us escape the convoy following us. Hundreds of leagues. How long does travel by Gateway take?"

"Minutes." Antoinette shrugged, "Or it's supposed to. Operating the Gateways is a skill. I did open the one in Bazereshahr, but I had Sarin's help. She had me activating the Gateways, waking up the network. I thought it was just training."

Aurili smiled and nodded, "The gods aren't always assholes. So where's the Gateway we want to take?"

"Sheshahr. Surprise, surprise."

Shahr was the phrase to look for in the cities. Sarin had said it meant something like 'path' in Wyrddin, though why cities had names derived from the demon tongue, wasn't something she had been willing to explain.

Aurili frowned, "We'll have to go via Seha Roz. It'll add a day to the journey, and they'll have worked out we went there by the time we're heading north again. You better be sure you can open that Gateway."

Antoinette winced, "I'm not. Not without some decent source of magic. Not just a rock. Something like... A single piece of Faen dust."

"We should catch the boat." Aurili sighed.

"If we can't find anything in Farves, we take the boat." Antoinette compromised, with no intention of actually following it through. If she couldn't find it, she was going to head out on her own. She was less likely to be hunted than the deserting soldier. She was a political figure.

Though predicting if the prince had ordered her own death was like predicting where a flower thrown with the wind would land. Difficult.

Aurili

She knew Antoinette wasn't happy with the situation, but Aurili was going to keep her alive. Those were her orders, and she would live by them. Even it meant following the woman as she backtracked across the nation, trying to be all secret about it.

Antoinette was different from many royals, but she was still obviously royalty. She chose to do the stupidest thing possible, given the circumstances. Like they all did. Aurili would clean up the mess, as she always had. Always would.

Unlike most royals though, the woman was willing to fight. She was able to do what was necessary, to stand up and defend her people. That was a skill that few politicians ever learned. They might join their armies at times, but never on the front line, and never alone. Surrounded by better soldiers, who weren't there to fight the battle. They were there to stop blind luck from killing off the heir to the throne.

She'd only ever heard of one exception to that, and he had been exceptional. Called by the gods. Azrael, a Paladin of Sarin.

What was it about Sarin that made all her chosen people so violent? So capable of turning talk into killing? Was it her willingness to do whatever was necessary? Did she pass that on to them?

It didn't matter. Sarin was dead and buried, like the rest of them. Even Shannon, who'd rejected the inheritance of god, was no dead. Her last act freeing Aurili from her vow.

It had hurt, so much.

"You need to be better than this, Aurili. And I know you can be. The era of war is over. I'm not letting it out again. I won't let war become a part of the new pantheon." She'd said, glaring at her with her grey eyes. Cold and without mercy, as the god of war should be. Yet she'd given all that up. Hoped for a peaceful future.

"You needed your skills, Aurili. For what is coming. To survive it. Your tale isn't over. It's... Beginning."

Aurili breathed in sharply. Even Shannon had known something was about to happen. Did she know she was going to die? Had Lilibeth?

That brilliant, and foolhardy woman had seen something, leading up to the banquet. Lilibeth had seen something so horrifying she'd curled into a ball, screaming and crying. She'd refused to talk about it at all. She had to have seen it. Why hadn't she told her? Tried to save herself?

Aurili fought back her tears, remembering staring down at Lilibeth as she bled out. Remembered holding her head, and begging her to stay with her. Promising the world and everything in it if she just stayed alive. Promising that they'd be together. Lilibeth hadn't heard. She was too far gone. She'd died alone, not knowing if Aurili cared about her.

This was the problem with sitting still. It let you remember. It let you feel things. She didn't want to feel anything. She wanted to kill something. To stand and fight outnumbered on a field of battle. To die as she made her enemy regret ever daring to rise against her.

But Shannon had told her to be better than that. So here she was, defending her partner, a princess, who was determined to wipe out the mere memory of the gods.

There were shrines in every world. This was folly. Guardians were placed at every shrine, even the lost ones. Champions of the gods, granted divine retribution. This would be a death sentence

for the both of them. Not that Aurili would mind if she died in battle. But she didn't want to fail Antoinette that way.

She sighed, kicking a branch into the fire. She was brooding. That was never a good thing. She closed her eyes, listening to the crackle of the fire, and began to hum to herself.

Antoinette looked up from where she was lying by the fire, "What's that song?"

Aurili shrugged, "Something my mother taught me."

"I want to hear it."

She tapped her foot to the beat, singing the soft and tearful song,

"I left my love far behind, *d'fhág mé mo ghrá i bhfad taobh thiar,*

as I rove to the rising sun, *agus mé ag dul go dtí an ghrian ag ardú,*

war in my stead, shield in my hand, *cogadh i mo áit, sciath i mo lámh,*

death by the door ahead, *bás ag an doras amach romhainn."*

Alfar

She tapped her hands to the beat as Garmr raced over the rooftops of the town, bounding across it with no regard for clotheslines or brickwork.

She liked the song. It was nice and sad. Aurili had a nice voice too. So pretty and kind, unlike her soul. The hate was eating her, but it wouldn't. Something else would eat her.

She tapped Garmr, halting him as she turned and looked through the edge between the spaces, at the pink-eyed girl. "You're cute. Are you lost?"

"I think you're the lost one." They replied hesitantly, "Also, I don't think anyone is supposed to be able to get in here. Is that a hellhound?"

"Garmr!" She announced, dropping off from beside him, "He's cute. I like cute things."

"He's a weapon of war." The pink-eyed one replied with a shiver, "Are... Are you a Sibyl? From Mishia?"

"I was." She nodded, "I will be. You're adorable. The way you snuggle with the white one. Her eyes sparkle."

The woman laughed, "You are so weird. Wait. No. You're a prophet. Not just an average Sibyl. How much can you see?"

"All of it." Alfar replied in surprise, "You're a smart one. Yes. I was talking about Aurili. She's cute. Especially when she gets mad at you."

"All the timelines, or all the world?" The pink-eyed woman asked cautiously, "Because you know me."

"All of it." Alfar snapped angrily, "I already have said it. I don't like that I will have had to say it again."

The woman held up her hands, "Not picking a fight... Can you... Take me out of here? Or is that a bad idea?"

"So bad." Alfar laughed, "You should have seen the Fae's face. Especially when the real Fae turned up. So bad. I didn't like it. So we won't have helped. But I can come talk."

"I'd like that."

Alfar shrugged, "I will have brought tea next time. You wanted tea."

Dyys

She stood silently in the middle of the arena, bound hand and foot to a post by silver chains. She wasn't exactly sure why they were using the silver. It wasn't like she was a Fae. Iron would have worked better, she was at least mildly allergic to iron. Silver was just a weak metal.

The crowd really was screaming. Screaming for her purification, and her death. So this was how Urmobia was coping with the calamity. With games of violence and death. Controlling the mob by distracting them, pretending justice was being done. Distracting them from the fact they had no food, no water, and disease was running rampant amongst them. This city was on the brink, and pretending the deaths of a few magic users would bring them back from the edge. Sarin might have actually intervened, if they weren't so violent, and she wasn't so dead. It wasn't entirely misguided. Just mostly.

Her chest burned violently, and she fell to one knee groaning. Doors in front of her burst open, revealing an enormous creature dropping head to toe with black dust. It was beyond infected with the Fel, it was consumed by it. It was also an ork. Bel had faced a Fel-consumed ork, right before her resurrection. The Fel belonged to Ausosa.

The Fae had to see her as a direct threat. A threat either too inconsequential, or too dangerous, to face openly. It was plain she was going to try and arrange for her death.

Dyys grinned as the ork charged towards her, the crowd screaming in excitement. She spun and shoved her hands forwards. There was a cracking sound as the chain whipped the central post out of the ground and tossed it across the dusty ground and slammed into the ork's face with an explosion of splinters. The crowd gasped in shock, going quiet before they roared again.

She didn't have a chance to smile, as the ork shook it off and charged towards her again. She whipped the silver chain into one of its eyes, popping it with a tiny spray of blood. The ork caught the chain and yanked on it. Her feet broke the hard ground beneath her feet as she barely shifted. A link of the chain broke and the ork tossed it aside. Which was when she saw it. The smoke rising from the creature's hand.

Orks weren't allergic to silver. But the Fel might be. It was Faen in origin.

That made this more fun. She hadn't been looking forward to beating a cursed creature with sheer strength, especially as she had the sneaking suspicion this was just the first round of many to come in her purification. Dyys wrapped the chains around her arms slowly, smiling at the ork.

It lowered its tusks and charged towards her. This time she didn't try to stop it. The barrelling monstrosity slammed into her as she caught it by the tusks. The creatures screamed in pain at the touch of the silver, and tried to sideswipe her. The fist slammed into her shoulder and came to an abrupt stop as the bones in the ork's hands shattered.

Dyys rolled her eyes, and then heaved, picking the ork up by the tusks and spinning it around on the spot. The creature flailed wildly as she increased speed until she could feel the muscles in her shoulders straining. She grinned at the ork. It stared up at her with wide eyes, "No..."

She let go, allowing one of the chains to loop around the tusk. The ork went flying as she braced herself and grabbed the chain with both hands. The ork reached the end, and there was crack as the neck snapped.

Dyys broke the chains holding her, dropping them to the ground and rubbed her wrists. She looked around at the cheering crowd going wild. So pleased that she'd murdered a creature that had no choice in the matter. A creature possessed by someone who was more evil than anything in this

world. More deserving of death than anything existed. The ork's only sin was being infected with the Fel.

Another door opened slowly, and Dyys turned, glaring. It wasn't an ork behind this door. It was a Hekate. A smiling woman, waving idly as if she hadn't been armed with a bronze buckler and a short sword. A gladius, like the Balavidian military used. They'd armed the Hekate, but tied Dyys to a stake to be eaten. They armed the more dangerous creature, to kill the one who had done them no harm.

Dyys crossed her arms, as Selene crossed the distance between them slowly. The Hekate bowed slowly, "I'm afraid I have been instructed to kill you, or we will both be destroyed."

She didn't get a chance to answer. It felt like those wars, all over again. Without warning, a sword driven towards her face, as golden eyes glowed with mirth at her impending death. Except there was a difference between now and then. She wasn't a teenager anymore. She didn't fumble need to fumble with weapons that might not obey her. She caught the hilt in one hand, as the silver chain on the ground melted and became a stake in her other.

They both coughed as she rammed the metallic object through the centre of Selene's stomach. She shoved the Hekate backwards, wiping the tar-like substance from her face with irritation. This was beginning to irritate her. If the Fel was going to punch her every time she touched her magical essence, she may as well go big. However, there was a small chance of the Hekate not trying to murder her. Which would be highly preferable.

Selene looked down at the silver stake and touched it gently. "Interesting. I thought most nonhumans were allergic to silver?"

The woman didn't even know her species, but was completely nonplussed by a pole of metal sticking through her. More concerned about whether or not her extensive knowledge was correct. She was more Hekate than she was human.

"That's Fae." Dyys yawned, "So, having second thoughts about killing me?"

"It was never my desire." Selene smiled innocently as if she hadn't just tried to take off her head, "However it seems the most logical thing to do in these circumstances. We cannot escape the arena, nor continue our research, without incurring significant harm. Winning the tournament seems the best way forward."

"You don't win." Dyys glared, "How do you not know about gladiator arenas? We're slaves now. You don't win. You survive, and get sold from trainer to trainer, earning them gold, and nothing for you, until you die. Human gladiators occasionally earn luxuries. Women, food, etc. But we aren't. Do you think that infected ork over there had a nice life waiting?"

Selene's face fell for a moment, just a moment. In that moment her golden eyes faded to a brilliant white. That was something Dyys had never seen before. What the heck did it mean? Witnessing the emotions of a Hekate hadn't happened. Mixing human with these violent creatures was not a good idea. Though love never really had good ideas. She'd nearly turned Bel into a human, Fury hybrid. That would have been much worse than whatever Selene was.

"Shall we kill them?"

Dyys' fangs showed as she smiled, and she looked around, "Not all of them. Just the soldiers. I have something for town leaders. Something special."

"Acceptable." Selene giggled, and she disappeared as a soldier in the distance tore in half with a spray of blood that covered spectators in every direction. That girl did not have the slightest idea

just how strong she was, and just how weak the mortals were.

The soldiers weren't ready for this. They were too spread out in a crowd that was now panicking at full volume, screaming and trampling each other to try and get away the gladiators who were now ignoring the rules.

Dyys launched herself backwards, an elbow driving through the face of a soldier that ran towards her. She continued passed him, gliding in the air peacefully, as his nearly-headless corpse collapsed to the ground. She wiped brain matter and bone off her arm easily.

The demon flashed her claws through the chest of a soldier, tripping him as she moved up the stairs slowly. With each footstep, people threw themselves out of her way, and soldiers ran to face her.

This felt more like home. Stupid idiots, rushing to hurt her, even when they knew they didn't stand a chance. She tore them apart, revealing their idiocy to them as they died. Forcing them to regret acting without thinking. She let the cowards run. They'd generate their own misery. Their own punishments.

This was true purification.

At the top of the stairs she saw the three she wanted. Adorned with laurel leaves like they were emperors. One of them was wondering if he could run, but as half his guards were already dead, didn't know where to run to. Another waited patiently, as if awaiting the headsman. The last didn't seem effected at all, sitting in his throne sipping a cocktail.

Dyys slammed across the space, holding up the cocktail glass and sniffing, "It's hardly the grapes of Kore, but it has been a while since I've had a decent drink."

She sipped it as Selene finished eliminating the guards. They'd never really stood a chance, not spread out for crowd control. It would take a targeted group to attack Dyys or Selene. A legion. Together they represented two or three legions worth of force. Nothing compared to a god, but everything compared to a mortal.

The man looked up at slowly, "I hope you enjoy it, demon. There are few fruits left. Creating something fresh like that, is difficult."

Selene leaned against a pillar nearby, giggling, "You shouldn't have said that."

"I am not a quorakstae demon!" Dyys roared, glaring at him, "I am a Fury. I was born in this world, before your ancestors crawled out of the mud. I was created by Yio, to serve as a defender of your world."

The man looked at her, "You look like a demon to me."

Dyys crouched slowly and poured the rest of the drink into his lap. She put the glass down gently beside him, "Don't you know when a girl is trying to be nice to you?"

He spat, a phlegm-filled gob that splattered her cheek. Dyys leaned back and sighed, glaring at him.

She felt surprise as Selene appeared beside her, wiping her cheek clean with a handkerchief. The Hekate wasn't smiling. Her eyes were white, and they weren't changing back, not this time.

Dyys frowned, "Are you okay?"

"No." Selene growled, turning to glare at the man who'd spat at her, "Such behaviour is uncouth. Unacceptable for one who claims to be a king. King of a city. King of the arena. Not even

the king of the nation. You are a tiny man, addressing someone more important than you could dream. She has walked among gods. She sat down with them to eat. You cannot claim to have even heard the voice, and you believe that you of all things are more important? You disgusting. And you are tiny. And now, you are dead.”

She bit of the last syllable, and Dyys blinked in surprise. It had been a while since she’d seen a killing curse so well executed. All that hate poured into a will powered by a truly enormous amount of mana.

The king choked for a moment, and then went limp in his chair. Selene adjusted her hair as she sat up, “Sorry. That wasn’t acceptable.”

Dyys grinned and elbowed her, “At least we know there’s plenty of human in you.”

The woman smiled nervously, tucking another stray hair back into the bun atop her head. Trying to appear the sweet and quiet librarian. Despite the fact she’d torn trained soldiers apart like they didn’t even exist. And enjoyed it to.

Dyys looked at the remaining two, “So which one of you wants to be emperor?”

Trei

Coming back here had been a mistake. The moment Trei had opened the door he'd been flooded with memories. Memories that hurt enough he wasn't embarrassed as Talin saw Summer's clothes flung across half the surfaces.

Trei waved him, and then sat slowly on the couch, "I need a minute."

He didn't know where Talin wandered off to, and didn't particularly care. This place hadn't been burned to ashes. It still smelled like her. He could still remember Summer glaring at him, daring him to complain, as she served him a completely blackened steak.

Summer wasn't a good cook. The Fae, as a rule, didn't cook. Flowers, leaves, and sap were the kinds of things they ate. Tea and warm nectar is what they drank. So when he'd come along, as a carnivorous ghou, they'd struggled to know how to feed him. He wasn't a carnivore anymore, but he still had his human habits. He liked cooked meat, and so Summer had tried to treat him.

He smiled sadly, a tear running down his cheek. It had been difficult not to laugh at her. She'd been trying so hard to make the perfect getaway for them, to escape the Council's endless politics, and attempts to control the very pregnant queen.

He missed her. His heart ached. Missed her smile, and glare. Missed the way she'd flick her hair in irritation. Missed her appearing out of nowhere to surprise him with a hug.

They didn't tend to bring Faith with them when they came here. This had been their place of escape, and the Faeling had been chaos incarnate. How do you control a creature that can fly from the moment they're born? A baby's attitude, a toddler's ability to run off, and the power of a god. Faith had been a handful.

They'd tried to bring Faith, the first time. But after mummy and daddy were too engrossed kissing each other, the Faeling had summoned her aunt out of another dimension, who had been in the middle of battling a goblin incursion. Luna had appeared, drenched head to toe in blood, very surprised, and filling the house with the rancid smell. Faith had smiled up at her aunt, as Trei and Luna stared in shock and horror, and then lifted her arms and asked for a game.

Summer had gone back, as Luna distracted Faith, and Trei tried to clean the house. It had been difficult, eliminating the smell. However, the goblins had tried to breach the Evening Realm since. Having a mad Summer turn up had been enough of a disincentive.

Trei clenched his fists, bowing his head.

He wanted them back. That was what he really wanted, but he knew it wasn't possible. Summer had been a part of the lifestream. With it corrupted, the woman he knew simply didn't exist anymore. And without her mother, no one would be able to find Faith's essence, to bring her back from what had happened. He could spend a billion years searching, and not find his daughter. She was gone.

He heard a sound and sighed. He sat up, snapping his fingers. Summer's clothes arranged, repaired, and folded themselves into a pile nearby. It wasn't much, and he couldn't bring himself to put them away, but it might make Talin feel a tiny bit more comfortable.

The Fae peeked into the room nervously, and Trei wondered if Talin was actually capable of feeling comfortable. He waved him over.

The Fae sat cautiously on the other couch, but didn't say anything. Trei smiled slowly, "Get the hang of it?"

Talin blushed instantly, “I... Eh... How do... Humans... Use it?”

Trei winced. He had not expected that response. Talin was Fae, he shouldn't have any problems deducing how a tiny piece of human mechanics works. Yet, he probably had.

Trei coughed, “Um... I'll teach you another time. Unless you still need?”

“No.” Talin said quickly.

He breathed a sigh of relief, “Well, this is the house. It should be fairly safe for you. There's a few dimensional barriers around it, making it difficult to pierce with magic. Mostly because of... Because of Faith. There's two bedrooms upstairs. You can have the one on the left. Knowing Luna, she's left in a mess. She always... She was like that.”

Talin nodded, and stood up slowly, “I... I think I'd like that. Sleep.”

Trei didn't stop the Fae, but he knew that it wouldn't be. He was avoiding his own sleep. He knew the nightmares that were coming. All the same, he could only push his physical form for so long. It needed to recuperate. He hadn't slept for weeks. Hunting for answers wasn't working.

He flicked a hand to the left, lighting the fireplace, and curled up on the couch, trying not to cry. Trying not to let himself be overwhelmed. Trying not to imagine Summer walking over and glaring at him for being so upset without telling her.

Trying not imagine Faith appearing out of nowhere, shattering his dimensional defences, before curling up on his neck and falling asleep as she chewed his ear.

How had Ausosa managed to stop the both of them? How?

Trei wept.

Antoinette

She'd fallen asleep, listening to Aurili sing a mournful song. She hadn't woken up as peacefully. She rolled as the horse nearly stamped on her and flew to her feet, staring as she saw Aurili in the doorway, sword drawn, battling two soldiers.

A warm hand touched her shoulder as she stood there frightened, and she heard Shannon whisper in her ear, "What do you say, shall we knock 'em down?"

Antoinette looked around in a panic, but she couldn't see anyone. The warm hand was still on her shoulder, though she couldn't see it. Yet, she could feel something. Her arms began to rise on their own, as every muscle in her body began to tighten and she felt a flood of adrenaline and mana.

She twitched, glaring at the two soldiers, trying to direct whatever the hell was going on. She heard Shannon whisper in her ear again, "Now, I've got a little spell for you to try. You ready?"

It sounded like Shannon, but it didn't. She didn't speak like that. Hell, Shannon didn't have magic of her own. She didn't know any spells, only summoning rituals and the miracles that Sarin had granted her. All the same, as the voice began to speak, she found herself copying it automatically.

"Ecnis, tersa, aqa, raudos, inghros, pora, strutjos, cita!" Antoinette shouted, sweating as she felt the magical force slam into her like a boulder. Her knees began to buckle, she couldn't hold onto this. This was too much. What the hell kind of spell was she casting? The final words ripped from her mouth, "Jungo atqe dheuko!"

Aurili stumbled as the sword she expected to slam into her vanished, turning into tiny pieces of light and dust. As did the soldier swinging it. He didn't have a chance to even look scared before he vanished.

Antoinette fell onto her knees as her stomach decided it wanted to join the air. The hand on her shoulder that wasn't there finally disappeared. Had it really been Shannon? Or was she going nuts?

The praetor spoke slowly, "What. The. Fuck. Was that spell?"

Antoinette winced, "I... I..."

She vomited again, before she could explain she didn't actually know. Call it the inspiration of the gods. Maybe Shannon had survived. She might have rejected it, but she was still the heir of Wrodin. Maybe that was enough. Enough to survive.

Aurili winced, "Oh gods. Never mind. We need to get moving. Try not to throw up on me."

Antoinette didn't say anything as the praetor pulled her onto the horse. She was feeling too weak. She could barely hold on as they took off. They'd get to Farves today, hopefully.

Aurili yelled back at her, "How the heck did you use magic without a crystal?"

That she didn't have an answer for. She'd never channelled that much mana before, not even with Faen dust, when she pulled Mytris back from the brink of death. That spell... It had used every bit of it as well.

It had to be Shannon. She had to have given her the mana. It had certainly felt like channelling the power of the god.

"Farves, ahead!" Aurili shouted, Antoinette tried to blink away the exhaustion, looking ahead at the small village nestled in the hills. She didn't know a whole heap about Balavid, but she knew

enough that the only village on a mountain path from a major port was a major trading destination.

For now, the best she could do was try and forget about Shannon. She was gone. It still hurt, and she really didn't want to get pulled into feeling hope, where there was none. The gods were all dead. Shannon couldn't have survived.

Aurili

She hung up the reins, and glared at Finnia, "Behave."

The horse snorted, as if telling her that expectation was beyond what was possible. That the strangers would get what was coming to them.

Aurili smiled and patted her neck, flicking a copper coin to the stable hand. It had been a while since she'd been to Farves. The last time she was here, she'd been hunting a deserter, attempting to leave by the port. Now she was the deserter, but at least the port wasn't her destination. Though it very nearly was.

She'd dragged the deserter through the street on her way out. Letting everyone know that the legions of Balavid were everywhere, and their authority was everywhere.

She hoped she was wrong.

Antoinette was leaning against the pole, fallen asleep standing up. That was shocking after the spell she'd pulled off. Which had utterly terrified Aurili. How could a sister, someone dedicated to the poor and to the sick, have known a spell that could erase people like they never existed? That was something that would have given Carmichael a wet dream. It was disturbing as shit.

Aurili put her arm around her, leading the half-asleep sister towards the marketplace. They needed magic, to decide which way they were going. Across the mountains to Seha Roz, to a boat, or from there head north to a magical gateway that might not even be running.

Their choices sucked. Lilibeth would have know what to do, how to turn this into a victory. Without her, Aurili didn't know what she was doing. She knew how to fight, and that was about it. If reinforcements hadn't joined the hunters, all that was left was the one soldier she'd already injured, but she didn't want to kill him. She regretted hurting him... A regret that didn't seem to have sunk in with the sister.

She'd murdered two men for doing their job, and she hadn't even reacted. More than that. If she parted from the ex-praetor, then she probably wouldn't face anything at all. Yet, she didn't seem to even consider it.

What was this woman from Ozandius? What had she seen in her life that killing soldiers was just a boring part of life, that danger of dying was just background noise not worthy of her attention?

Ozandia. She knew that something had happened there. That the orks and elfin had invaded, lead by the goddess Kru, but details beyond that were sketchy. Even the invasion story didn't sound right. Shortly after their arrival, Kru had agreed to a peace treaty with Ozandius, even agreeing to defend them from Yurk, who had tried to invade but been overwhelmed by a mass migration of goblins. The remainders of the army took one look at the orks and ran for it.

Yet, stories persisted. Most of the details disagreed, making them unreliable, but somehow the story that the High Priestess, Shannon, had been part of both events. That she had stood up to Kru on her own, and defeated the goddess. And that she had somehow also travelled to Yurk and forced the king to stand down.

Carmichael had suggested there was truth to both accounts, but he was insane. Yet, now that she knew Shannon had been the heir of Wrodin, it made sense. There was no way a mortal could stand up to a god and live, but a god against a god? That was normal.

Antoinette looked at her tiredly, "Shut up."

Aurili paused walking, "What?"

“Shannon wasn’t a god. She was mortal. She still stopped Kru.”

Aurili’s eyes widened, “How the . . . You were in my head. You can read thoughts?”

Antoinette just looked tired and confused.

“You were in my head.” Aurili growled between clenched teeth, feeling both disturbed and angry about it. Even if the sister couldn’t control the ability when this tired, it was a violation. A very personal violation.

“I can’t read thoughts.” Antoinette laughed, “I can barely use magic. Oh wow. I can see your aura. That’s new.”

Aurili burst out laughing, holding the exhausted sister. “You . . . You . . . You’re getting stronger. You did read my thoughts.”

Antoinette rubbed an eye, trying to focus, “Huh?”

“The spell this morning.” Aurili giggled, “That was you. Getting stronger. You’ve had a growth spurt.”

Even the sister laughed at the way she was describing it. It wasn’t that humorous, but both of them needed it. Needed to laugh at something, anything. Otherwise they’d be hiding in a corner crying. They’d both lost their worlds.

“Fuck you’re dark.” Antoinette complained, her face falling.

Aurili winced, looking down. “Sorry.”

The sister pulled her, though still leaning on her, “Come on. Let’s just find the bloody market.”

It was more of a bazaar than a market. Open air, stalls that appeared and disappeared to the timing of the patrols. Girls standing around and proclaiming that the goods being sold were the very best. Girls who just happened to have iron bracelets around their ankles.

Aurili hated watching the slaves. She’d never felt comfortable with it, but she didn’t have a choice in it. She’d been sold into the army as a child herself. At least they granted freedom if you moved beyond auxiliary.

Antoinette winced, “Slaves. Damn it.”

Aurili smiled at her, “Ozandius doesn’t have slavery, does it?”

“No.” Antoinette smiled tightly, “No it doesn’t. Yurk does. I certainly remember that.”

Aurili sighed, “Just . . . Try not to be too obvious. We’re not meant to be making waves here. Ozandius is the only nation that doesn’t have them, well, mainly.”

“Solas doesn’t.” Antoinette said, pouting, and then shrugged, “Fine. Magic. Where should we look?”

Aurili glanced around and shrugged. It was a bazaar. You wandered around until you found what you wanted or got your purse pinched. Or both at once.

She moved along the line, pausing in front of a weapons merchant. As much as she adored her gladius, it was a dead giveaway that she was a soldier. Especially as it had the mark of a praetor.

She eyed up the stall holder. He seemed the nervous type, he shouldn’t mind touching something that shouldn’t be for sale. She paused, looking over his weapons, he had a decent bronze buckler and short sword combination. She nodded at it, and touched the blade on her hip.

The man smiled slowly, “So you’d be Praetor Aurili, then.”

Shit.

She shrugged. No expression. Any emotion could be a sign of weakness, and she couldn't afford that when dealing with someone who was thinking about selling her out.

"Prince put nine hundred silver on your head." The stallholder grinned, "Got anything worth that much on you?"

Antoinette raised her tired head, glaring at him, "Aidho."

Aurili flinched as she felt something next to her. She didn't know how to describe it. It felt like the sister changed. Like she wasn't there, but was. Like something took her place, increasing the weight of the world. Just for a moment.

The stallholder's eyes watered and he gasped, "Oh shit balls. You have a mage with you."

Aurili shrugged, and unbuckled her sword, holding it up, "Sheathe as well."

He shook his head, "Screw you. Take 'em."

She put it down, picked up the other sword and buckler. She'd never really used them before, but it wouldn't take long to pick up. She was a sworn servant of Wrodin. All forms of war had been what she practised. A new weapon was something she'd learned dozens of times before.

Antoinette smiled softly, "So, anything for a mage?"

The stallholder winced, "No. I don't carry magic. You guys get inside my head too much."

"Liar." Antoinette admonished, "You're just scared I won't like it. What is it?"

The sister was reaching a creepy level here. She shouldn't be able to use magic at all, but she was. She'd threatened the man, hurting him somehow, and now she was waltzing around in his head. What was going on with her?

The man muttered and pulled a necklace from beneath the table. It was silver, tiny thin chains that had to be the work of elfin, with a fist-sized blue stone hanging from the end of it. She could see light flashing inside the stone.

A storm stone. Those were rare. This had to be a special purchase for a customer. One that they did not want chasing after them. Buying this would be trouble.

"Who was it for?" Aurili asked, trying to get the point across to Antoinette.

"Carmichael ordered it." The stallholder said with bitter disappointment, "But you killed him, didn't you?"

It did not surprise Aurili that Carmichael was in communication with a bunch of shady dealers. However, there was one more concern.

"And who was it stolen from?"

Antoinette laughed, "Duh. It was taken from the Zanfrian Priestess. The one Carmichael was shitting himself over."

This seemed a bad idea all over, but it was also the best thing that they'd be able to get a hold of. Maybe it would help them destroy the shrines faster, and they did tend to be hidden away. Maybe with the gateways they'd be safe from the vengeance of Zanfir.

The stallholder looked at the necklace and back to them, "Fuck. Really? Uh... You can have it."

Antoinette took it like it wasn't a beacon to a terrifying army of thousands. "Guess we're going there, then."

Aurili smiled grimly as she attached her new sword to her belt.

Alfar

“God is sad.” She moped, tossing stolen sandwiches to her hellhound. The dog happily wolfed down the food, and then padded up to her, placing his gigantic head in her lap.

She smiled and hugged it, burying her head somewhere between his two ears. “God is crying. Poor god. He doesn’t know how sad he will be.”

Alteo sat down beside her, putting a gentle hand on her back and rubbing it. She didn’t say anything. That’s what Alfar liked about her. She never tried to control her. Never tried to force her to say things about the past or the future.

It was so hard to tell them apart. She saw them all at the same time. A fractal of the entire universe, shifting and shaping. Becoming what must be as it forgot what could be. She hated that she had been born this way.

“The girl-boy survived.” Alfar whispered, “Your spell worked.”

“You already told me it would.” Alteo replied, “But thank you.”

“All the elements are aligned, and destruction comes from the mouth of the Fae.” Alfar said, her voice wobbling, “She shouldn’t be. It’s a mistake, teaching her. We should have.”

Alteo held up the silver tray, “Did Garmr eat all of these?”

“No.” Alfar replied innocently.

Alteo glared, “Just because you don’t like sandwiches doesn’t mean the entire Oracle should go without.”

“The grain is growing.” Alfar moaned, “I don’t like it. Garmr does. He doesn’t mind the taste of the Fel. I see it.”

She burst into tears, grabbing the hellhound and burying her head in him, “I see the Fel. Burning and corrupting. Not now. Before and now and next. Breaking through the illusion. Making itself happen. Because she wanted it. Needed it. For him.”

Alteo patted her back gently, “Shh. It’ll be okay.”

“It won’t! It wasn’t!” She balled her eyes out as Garmr let out a warning growl towards the First Sibyl, reminding her that though she might lead the Oracle, he would happily swallow her and digest her over the next thousand years if she dared to make his friend more upset.

Alteo sighed, leaning against her, “I’m sorry, Alfar.”

She reached behind, dragging the woman next to her in a hug against the hard metal of the hellhound, “I like you, Alteo. You’re so nice. You don’t blame me. Lilibeth even likes you.”

Alteo raised an eyebrow, “Who is Lilibeth?”

“Aurili’s girlfriend.” Alfar smiled, “They’re cute together. Like watching the mountains melt.”

“Aurili...” Alteo frowned, “She’s the soldier with Antoinette, isn’t she?”

Alfar nodded, “Lilibeth died. She died at the banquet. Aurili is mad. Lilibeth is just sad.”

Alteo shrugged, “We all have our role to play. We do the best we can. Look at you. Trying to remain happy, even when you already know how it ends. When you get to experience all the timelines that die. Forced to see the regrets of everyone in the worlds. You’re our bravest. I’m proud of you.”

Alfar wrinkled her nose happily, “Thank you. I needed that. Oh. I forgot. I was bringing tea and biscuits. Do you want to see Lilibeth? It’ll help.”

Alteo nodded slowly, “I’ll get some from the kitchen. How are we going to get to this dead woman? I don’t like projecting across time.”

Alfar patted the head of her puppy, “Garmr likes the jump. It feels funny.”

Dyys

She washed her hands, scrubbing the blood away, whilst Selene waited nearby patiently and quietly. She was clean. Not a hair left out of place. Despite what had happened.

She hadn't been surprised the mortals had acted out, but she was concerned about the Fel-infected ork. Ausosa controlled the Fel, which meant she knew where they were, and perhaps why they were here.

She turned the tap off and dried her hands on the cloth offered by the terrified woman standing in the king's personal bathroom. Dyys smiled at Selene, "Shall we?"

The librarian nodded, and they left the arena. An abandoned arena, absent almost everyone, except those too scared to leave with the two of them still around, afraid of insulting them.

Dyys rolled her shoulders, "Did you notice the ork?"

"Indeed." Selene nodded, "An infection of corrupted magic, the Fel. Traditionally it has been attributed to the creator of the orks, Drak'tur, but I had heard from several sources that Kru had cured orkind of the Fel. It was surprising to see one still controlled by it."

Dyys nodded, "Ausosa is why Kru ended up curing them all. Because she is using it."

"That makes sense." Selene nodded, "Despite the tradition, the Fel is actually the magic of a Fae, like most magics. As light magic comes from Summer, so the Fel comes from Luna, though the latter tends to avoid using her own magic, as it poses a danger even to her. Ausosa supposedly is the combination of the powers of those two sisters."

Dyys shook her head, "I never understood why the Fae call each other brother and sister. Aren't they all the same generation? And only vaguely related to each other?"

"Summer was the template, so far as I can find." Selene nodded, "Thus I guess you can see there were two generations, Summer, and then the rest. But yes, they don't really view familial relationships in the same way. Rather, as part of their political structure they have family houses, ruled by those that can create a realm and sustain it. These houses are each seen as more tightly related, but it is not by genetics, and more by choice."

Dyys smiled, "Weird. What do you know about Hekate?"

"Little." Selene shook her head, "I cannot recall the name, or a similar one, from my studies. You appear to be my only source."

Dyys glanced at her, "And you've been patient. Waiting for me to tell you. After that little display, I think you have an idea of what your people is capable of. Why the Furies had a problem with them."

Selene nodded, "Maybe. I didn't realise how slow everyone else really is."

"You're faster than me." Dyys shrugged, "I think that puts you in the realm of shockingly fast."

The woman's eyes glowed golden for a moment, as if she'd just been complimented. Dyys sighed, "We went to war over a shrine. Your people tried to destroy it, mine tried to defend it. When we defeated you, you waited a couple years, and then came back. Kept coming back. So we wiped you out. It was the only way to stop you."

Selene winced, "Oh. Was this before the Furies entered hell?"

"Before Hero convinced us we were demons." Dyys nodded, "May the bastard rot."

“You know of that time?”

“I remember it.” Dyys said with regret, “That’s part of why I ran away. I got my memories back. All of them. I remember meeting Hero for the first time. How genuine he seemed. How head-over-heels in love with Alexis he acted. Power at any cost, that’s all he ever cared about.”

Selene considered her, “To know Hero, you must be hundreds of years old.”

“Thousands.” Dyys replied with a laugh, “I don’t know how long you’ll live. Humans can’t even live to a hundred, that probably shortens your lifespan considerably, but for me? I’m eternal. Like elfin. I won’t die until someone kills me... Well, I guess not even then, now.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m a lich.” Dyys shivered, “Bel brought me back. Resurrection is... Difficult. Extremely difficult to get right. I only have a part of my soul. Probably why the Fel has been so quick to infect me, and not you.”

“Incorrect.” Selene shook her head, and pulled down the front of her top without a regard for modesty. Black lines traced the tops of her breasts. She pulled it back up, “I simply choose not to express it. I expect that ability will fade with time.”

Dyys laughed, “I don’t throw up by choice. The Fel is killing me. Well, making me belong to it. Ausosa will eventually be able to crush my will, if this keeps going.”

“Unfortunate.” Selene agreed, “And as any cure so far has required the use of magic, it is unlikely to succeed, now that the lifestream has been infected with the Fel. But you’ve avoided the specifics of the question. How old are you?”

Dyys laughed at her, “I didn’t tell Bel. I’m not about to tell you. What can you tell me about Be Liphu?”

Selene tapped her chin, arranging her thoughts, “A port city. There is nothing nearby, just wild plains. Most ships choose to travel to Urmobia to do their trade, rather than risk the storms off the coast. Be Liphu is actually close to a border with Yurk, despite no Yurkian towns, cities or fortresses being located on the peninsular. The border is uncontested. Solas doesn’t seem to be willing to engage Yurk in battle.”

That was unsurprising. Yurk was an empire to be reckoned with, and their capital was only within a few days march of Solas. They could crush it any time they wanted to, but Solas provided a convenient buffer against Nal’farah doing the same. With Ozandius usually at war, neither nation wanted the risk of their enemy becoming an ally, and so the tiny nation of Solas was left to its own devices.

“Be Liphu has been rumoured to possess a gateway for some hundreds of years, though one has never been located. Most believe it to be in a selection of buildings just outside the town wall, referred to as Stonetown by the locals. Those buildings predate every part of the town, and the descriptions might fit Faen constructions.” Selene continued.

“Unlikely.” Dyys laughed, “The Fae hate stone. They use wood, almost exclusively. They like living things.”

“Stonetown isn’t stone.” Selene smiled, “The first settlers called it that, because they believed they’d discovered a new form of stone. The buildings are made of petrified wood.”

Now that did sound like something that could be Faen. However, Dyys had lived there herself, or she thought it was where she had camped out, guarding a shrine for fifty years or so. Her own

people had a different sort of architecture. Mostly involving reshaping the ground itself into a home. Like dragging the ground into the air.

“Furies tend to shape the ground.” Dyys said, “Anything like that ring a bell?”

“An area of town called the Valleys.” Selene nodded, “Houses cut into the ground itself with astonishing craftsmanship. Attempts to duplicate it have failed. It is speculated that they were created with magic. The Valleys are also outside the walls, and much of the nearby ground is infertile. Though there is a small population of people desperate enough to live there, they are generally considered cursed.”

Dyys burst into a grin. That sounded right.

Trei

He had been awake long before anyone else was. He'd wandered around the familiar city for a while, but when even the crooks are sleeping there isn't much to do. Sleep just wasn't something he was good at right now.

It was filled with nightmares and memories. Remembering being resurrected by Summer. Being killed by Vastras. The first three words Summer had ever spoken to him.

"Oh. It's awake."

His response had been equally as classy, "You're... Fae."

That moment hadn't at all told the tale of how close they would become. Summer flaunting herself, and responding to his every word with irritation. Treating him like an absolute idiot in private, whilst defending him absolutely to the Council without his knowledge.

Summer had abandoned him outdoors in the garden, when he couldn't even move. And then when he was stuck face down on the floor of her house a few moments later, she'd dropped the bombshell that the Council was demanding they either kill him, or she marry him.

He hadn't reacted well to that. He'd hurt her. Didn't understand yet that she wanted it. That she'd imprinted on him. An instantaneous reaction for a Fae, causing an irrevocable possessiveness. He was hers, and she wanted him as hers from that first moment.

He'd remembered proposing to Summer, right before Janus had kidnapped him. Before Janus was murdered by a Fate, and Trei was left to starve to death.

He remembered the clumsy way he'd tried to tell Summer he loved her, that he wanted to be with her alone, and instead had convinced her he was exiling her.

He'd remembered her shoving him to the ground, and ordering him to kiss her. Remembered how much more than kissing they had done. That was the moment that Faith had been created. When Summer's womb had been created. The sex hadn't been great for either of them. They hadn't known what they were doing, they were both virgins. Summer had cried for days, thinking something was wrong with her. Trei had hated himself. Yet, it had lead to the birth of their daughter.

He remembered holding Faith gently as panicked doctors tried to save Summer's life a few months later. The womb had disintegrated during the birth. Summer had nearly bled out. No Fae before had the organ. Just her, just that once. So that Faith could be born.

A new kind of Fae. Faith had been different than the others. She was stronger than all of them, and faster to learn. She was a magical savant. When you come from a race known as the source of all magic, that particular praise comes with impressive weight.

Faith had terrified him. Wandering across timelines and the Void because she was bored. Hiding beyond the ordinary limits of reality when she was upset. Heading off to Sarin's place for afternoon tea without assistance. She jumped the hurdles others struggled with as if they weren't even there to begin with.

He couldn't keep his daughter safe, because she was stronger than him. Her mind wasn't developed to the point where she could tell if someone was using her, manipulating her, but her powers were at a point where only gods could stand in her way.

Gods made for shitty babysitters and role models.

Now she was gone. Summer was gone. Everyone he had ever cared about was murdered by a

Fae with a chip on her shoulder. A Fae that wanted to wipe out humanity, the gods, and everyone else who had ever hurt her.

Yet, here he was, sitting at home, waiting for a terrified Fae to wake up to a world where everyone they had known was dead. A world that hated them not just for being the wrong species, but for wanting something different than what they were born with.

It was wrong.

No part of this situation could be considered remotely good.

He couldn't do what he wanted to do. It wouldn't be right, and it wouldn't be just. He would be betraying Summer's memory. He had been the one she looked to do what was right, no matter the cost.

It would cost him. It would hurt like hell, every moment. Yet, he had to let go of his desire to kill Ausosa. He had to stay here. Had to protect Talin, and ensure he had a real chance at life. These people weren't about to accept a transgender Fae into their midst. Not unless Trei forced them to.

He sighed heavily, hating himself. Hating how easily he'd convinced himself to give up. All the same, he also knew it was the right thing to do. It was the only right thing to do.

He walked up the doors slowly, and knocked on the slightly ajar door, not knowing if the Fae was awake. "Talin. I'm staying."

Then he turned and walked back down the stairs. He might still have to have that conversation, and that was a terrifying thought, but he'd made himself take the first step.

For now, Namatay was his home.

There was a knock at the door. Timid, but firm. Trei stood up in surprise, staring at it. Whoever it was knew how to mask their presence. Which wouldn't be any of the townsfolk brave enough to knock on his door. There was no local fortress, so no local wizard or prince willing to try and attack or capture him. Just a mayor who was doing his best to pretend that Trei didn't exist at all. A man with no magical talent whatsoever, like most humans.

Trei approached it carefully, and swung the door open slowly, immediately wishing he hadn't.

In front of him, was a Fae. A woman with brown hair, brown eyes, and barely visible wings dripping with blue magic. He knew her well, more than he wished to. He had never expected to see her here, not again. For her crimes against Summer, and the rest of the Fae, she had been sentenced to an eternity in exile. She'd been given a choice. A way to make up for her crimes, but she hadn't taken it. She'd preferred an eternity in exile to admitting she was wrong. Admitting to the harm she had caused.

Kru had been one of her generals. It was the woman in front of him who had killed a Faeling without a moment's hesitation. Who had killed a Fate for telling her it was across the line. So Trei had exiled her, to a realm beyond the Void, a realm created by Janus, the Fae she loved, and the Fae she had tried to avenge by destroying the Faen realms in a civil war.

Ashwen glared at him, still burning with rage.

Trei rolled his jaw, "You survived, then."

"That's all you have to say to me?" Ashwen hissed, "They're dead, Trei. All of them. Every fucking last one of them died. Where were you? Our fabled king?"

“Burying Summer and my daughter.” He replied with a growl, asking her to keep going. Begging her to justify killing her.

Ashwen paused slowly, “Summer’s dead?”

“And Luna. Claven. Astrian. Yio. F’rir. Sarin. Wrodin. Meria. Kao.” He continued slowly, with each name Ashwen’s eyes grew wider, and she through up her hands, “Stop! Please! Gods, Trei. Is everyone dead?”

“Talin survived.” Trei thumbed behind him, “Ausosa killed everyone else.”

Ashwen stumbled backwards, “Godsdamn voiden luminous shitfuck. Ausosa is alive?”

Trei didn’t say anything, he just glared at her.

“Fuck. Fuck.” Ashwen repeated, shaking her head, “Oh gods. If she finds out I’m alive. . . Oh fuck, fuck.”

Trei blinked in surprise, “She have a particular reason to kill you? Other than you being Fae?”

“I testified against her, Trei!” Ashwen snapped, “Oh fuck. I was the one who pointed out the affair between her and Pheter. If it wasn’t for me, he would have taken the fall for her. Protected her. Gods. . . You have to protect me. Please.”

Trei considered it, and considered slamming the door in her face. She had been banished for trying to kill Summer. Her crime certainly matched that of the first affair, and the first murder. She’d been the direct and indirect cause of the deaths of hundreds of Fae, and when they’re killed, they don’t reincarnate. They rejoin the lifestream. If it wasn’t for his divinity, he wouldn’t have been able to bring Summer, or any of the others, back. Because of this woman.

“Wait here.” Trei replied.

Ashwen stared in surprise as he slammed the door. He walked back up the stairs and opened the door slowly, “Talin?”

The Fae froze in surprise, standing there, half-dressed. Thankfully, he had his pants on, but he didn’t have his bra or top on. Trei winced, spinning around on the spot, “Damn it. Sorry, I forgot to knock.”

All the same, it was hard to get the picture out of his head. The Fae was not unattractive. Blue hair, cut as short and masculine as he could without turning punk, grey eyes that seemed both sad and fragile, and rugged black wings that were mere wisps of shadow floating in the background, and though Trei didn’t want to admit it, an amazing chest.

“Well, you’ve seen them now.” Talin laughed, “Still think of me as a guy?”

“That’s what you want.” Trei shrugged, “So. . . Yes?”

“Then it shouldn’t matter.” Talin replied bitterly.

Trei laughed, “I’d turn away from a guy if I saw his particularly attractive dong, too.”

That was true. He still thought of Talin as male, but also attractive. He wouldn’t have, in his first life as a blacksmith. Talin would have been killed by a lynch mob if he were human. Yet, with time amongst the Fae, all that had lost meaning to Trei. Attraction was a spectrum, and it didn’t give a damn about male, female, other or in-between all three. Trei definitely leaned towards females, but it wasn’t a crime to appreciate how a male might look. Well, it might be a crime in Yurk. It shouldn’t be.

Talin giggled at that, “Fair enough. What’s so important?”

“There’s another Faen survivor.” Trei began. Talin immediately grabbed his back, and Trei could tell he still hadn’t put the bra on. Talin whispered in his ear breathlessly, “Really?”

“Don’t get excited yet.” Trei winced, “It’s Ashwen.”

Talin let go instantly, and Trei could feel the anger burning there. “What the fuck does she want?”

“Sanctuary from Ausosa, now that I’ve told Ashwen she’s alive.” Trei shrugged, “I think she originally came to kill me for letting the realm collapse without saving them.”

“Did you let them die?”

Trei shook his head, “The realm died when Summer died. In that moment. I guess if I had gone to them instead of Summer, they might be alive. Maybe. But I went to where Faith died.”

“I’m not about to blame you, Trei.” Talin said cautiously, “You can look now.”

He turned and smiled, “Well, Talin? Do we tell her to piss off?”

Talin stared, “Why are you asking me? You’re the king!”

“I’m not Fae.” Trei stated, “She and Ausosa may be the only other Fae in existence, other than you. So this should be your decision. Is the death of your species worth having her around? I don’t know. Personally, I wouldn’t mind breaking her fucking neck. But I’m not exactly in a good state of mind, and I have a lot more first-hand experience of her than you.”

Talin swallowed, and then sighed, “Void. There might only be four Fae. We can’t toss her out. But, there is something I want to do first.”

Trei agreed to it, and they both went back downstairs and opened the door, where a very red-faced Fae was twiddling her thumbs and looking around nervously. She smiled as she saw them, “Yes. Awesome. I thought you might actually just leave me here. People are staring.”

Trei laughed, “They might have seen a Fae or two, that doesn’t mean they’re used to it.”

Talin stepped forward, “You want to stay here, is that right?”

Ashwen winced, “... Yes.”

“Even though you murdered half our population in your godsdamned war?” Talin growled, his voice dropping further than Trei had thought it could.

Ashwen looked at her feet, “Goodbye. I guess.”

“I’m not done!” Talin screamed at her, and Ashwen froze, rooted to the spot. Trei didn’t blame her. He’d never seen Talin this fired up about anything at all. Never even heard of him yelling at a customer, back in the day. That being said, with how Trei had found him, it wouldn’t be shocking if the Fae had finally snapped.

Talin stepped forward, “There are two things I’ve wanted to do to you for a very long time, Ashwen.”

The brunette cringed, and then her eyes widened in shock as Talin kissed her cheek gently. Then before she could sputter out any kind of response, a very male punch landed square on the other cheek and absolutely flattened the Fae into the ground.

Talin cursed loudly, holding his hand, and then turned and walked back inside the house.

Ashwen sat up on hands and knees, her thoughts and emotions still flashing madly across her aura. Complete confusion.

Trei grinned and crouched, “You can stay. I don’t like you. I would like to kill you. But you can stay.”

Ashwen looked over at him, “Thanks. Um. Can you explain? What was Talin trying to say to me?”

“That you’re an idiot.” Trei grinned, “Twice over.”

He stood up, dusting his hands and walked inside, leaving the door for Ashwen to deal with. Which is when he remembered the house only had two beds. Nevermind. Ashwen could have one of the couches. It wasn’t like he’d let her in Summer’s room.

Antoinette

A storm stone! Antoinette could not believe her luck. She knew that Aurili was probably terrified that they might be tracked by the Zanfrians, but that was what made storm stones so rare. They couldn't be seen by magic. Unless you saw one with the naked eye, you thought it was just a rock. Nothing special about it. Except a storm stone was incredibly special. It was basically bottled lightning, or the essence of lightning. It was also easy to recharge. Hang it on a pole in the middle of a storm and wait for lightning to strike it.

The cold stone felt good where it hung against her chest. A firm weight, reminding her of the task she'd sworn to undertake. The role she had to play in this ending of the saga, because the saga was coming to an end. Either the world, or everyone in it, would die. There wasn't any other way out of that. The gods were dead, which meant that the roles they filled in keeping nature functioning were now empty. Habit would only keep the 'verse grinding along for so long.

They were walking now, the ground too treacherous to risk a fall from the horse. There was no road directly from Farves. The only road went from Fugan. Any sane person took the long way around. There were still tracks, here and there, mostly used by what Antoinette had to assume were smugglers. There was also a single watch tower up ahead, which they were easily avoiding, thus far. The hard part would be getting down from the mountains without being seen.

Aurili stood at the top of the particular section of mountain and cracked her back, and sighed, "I don't think we should go much farther today."

Antoinette was about to complain it was barely afternoon until she came up beside her and saw torches lighting in the distance. "What the heck?"

"Soldiers." Aurili muttered, "Those are soldier groupings. I can't tell who or why they're here. Maybe to hunt some smugglers... But I'm not even sure if they're Balavidian. They might be the First Legion, who were sent north months ago, but I wasn't aware they'd been recalled. The northern border with Nal'farah has... Problem areas. Magic problem areas. From one of the wars. The Legion was sent to contain an outbreak of horrors. Praetor Radhii sent word that he didn't think they could safely retreat for the foreseeable future."

Antoinette flinched, "If they were there, when the gods died..."

Aurili nodded, "Exactly. They'd all be dead. So who are these cats? The terrified remnants of a defeated legion? Soldiers sent to find us? Mercenary army? Or, Zanfir?"

Antoinette looked around, "There's no cave that I can see, but we can shelter under that outcropping."

"No fire tonight." Aurili ordered.

Antoinette lead the horse under the shelter, and pulled some straw from one of the saddlebags, offering a mild apology to the horse for how little food there was. It didn't look like the horse would forgive her.

Then she rested her tired back against the stone wall, watching in the distance at the blinking lights of someone crossing the mountains in great numbers. Ridiculous numbers. She couldn't count them easily, but knowing her anxiety, she would have by the time the night was over.

She looked down at the gently sparkle of the blue light inside her stone, tucked inside her top, and held the stone. It felt safe. She hadn't held this much power in a long time. It wasn't equally to Faen dust, but then, nothing really came close. Apart from whatever Shannon had done to her

earlier.

Aurili rolled out a sleeping mat and sat down on it, glaring at her, “Okay, time to spill. This morning?”

Antoinette winced, “I... I’m going to sound crazy. And I don’t know if I am.”

Aurili cringed, “Not helping yourself much there, mage. Magic is infected with the Fel.”

“I know.” Antoinette snapped, “I... I heard Shannon. I didn’t have any magic, but Shannon talked me through a spell, and I could feel her touching me... And I’ve never had that much magic. Ever. I have not the faintest clue how I pulled that off. It should have killed me to hold that much magic, Aurili.”

The ex-praetor considered her carefully, not reassuring Antoinette by measuring her distance to several weapons, like the bow in the horse’s bags. Finally Aurili spoke hesitantly, “Shannon was a god. Or something. It... Might... Be possible she survived. Unlikely. But possible. It’s also possible your nuts. More likely. But, either way, where did the magic come from? No one can summon magic out of thin air. It’s either stored, like in Faen dust or crystals, or it’s living and comes from something. Like the ground or, if you’re divine, the lifestream itself.”

Antoinette shrugged, “It felt like Shannon gave it to me. I don’t know where it came from.”

Aurili shrugged as well. “There’s no telling. But thank you, for telling me I might have a homicidal insane mage along for the ride. I didn’t mean it that way. Thank you for telling me. Warning me. I realise you could have kept it secret. I appreciate it.”

Antoinette glared, “Thanks, I feel so much better.”

Aurili flopped onto her bedroll with frustration. “Fine. Distract us both. What was Shannon like?”

“Insane.” Antoinette giggled, “She was... When she got jealous of me, and a boy everyone thought she liked, she put ratspiders in my underwear. Gravel in my morning cereal. Small things like that.”

Aurili laughed, “Ratspiders? You mean those fucking massive venomous things?”

Antoinette shivered at the memory, “You can see the legs sticking out. I may have squealed loud enough to wake the entire dorm when I found it the first morning.”

Aurili looked over at her incredulously, “She did it more than once?”

“Shannon wasn’t nice when she was jealous.” Antoinette laughed, “She could be petty. And cruel. Heck, when she deposed the priestess I thought everyone was going to hide from her for years. She interrogated her with the Miracle of Truth.”

“Fuck.” Aurili said slowly, “And this is the woman you love?”

“Absolutely.” Antoinette replied quickly, “Shannon would do what’s necessary. I mean, not the underwear thing. The other thing. I used to kid with her that she was always in a bad mood. She was sweet. Really.”

The sister broke off as tears started running down her face, “The way she confessed to me... She called me an idiot. She didn’t say it straight, that she liked me. She implied it. I’d bathed her because she was too tired to even move. Couldn’t even keep her head up. And she let me know I was wrong that she liked the boy. That she wouldn’t have let even him bathe her. That she wanted me to keep her awake. I nearly missed it.”

Aurili looked at her sadly, “She sounds nice. Not my type, but nice.”

“Cruel, and petty and jealous and human. Through and through.” Antoinette smiled, brushing aside tears, “And she got killed like a god. It isn’t fair. That’s not what she was. It isn’t what she wanted to be.”

Aurili nodded quietly, beginning to cry.

Antoinette winced, “Shit. Lilibeth wasn’t a god either. I’m sorry.”

“She was to me.” Aurili replied, “Godsdamn it. She was to me. Every part the goddess. I never even had to ask. She knew I’d sworn a vow of celibacy, and that was enough for her. What kind of person never ever says how they feel when both of you know? I came so close to telling her, so many times. It isn’t like you can keep a secret from a prophet. When I was saying goodbye to her, sending her off to invade a dwergaz ruin, like the one that nearly killed the both of us, I came so close to breaking my vow. So close. Even Carmichael noticed.”

Antoinette smiled weakly, “The ruin. Is that where you met?”

“No.” Aurili shook her head, “We were auxiliaries. Slaves sold to the military. I was seven when I was sold. Lilibeth was four. She was already the serious soldier by the time I met her. Neither of us were any good. Too young. We were both dedicated, and competitive. I was nine, and she was ten, when we got sent to the ruin. Everyone else died. I thought she died. I had my first vision when I went to stab her. Wrodin declaring me as his chosen weapon. When it faded, my eyes were white, and hers were pink. She’d seen Meria. Been selected as a prophet.”

Antoinette’s eyes widened, “Wow. Verity was a prophet, and she had pink eyes. I didn’t think about it. Didn’t connect the two. They are cute.”

Aurili grinned at her, “They are, and that is when I realised just how damn cute she was. Right after swearing a vow of celibacy.”

“You were nine!” Antoinette exploded, “How can I nine year old make that kind of vow?”

“I wasn’t nine anymore.” Aurili replied grimly, “Not after what I’d been through. Not after what I’d seen. I may have regretted my vow, now and then, but I didn’t regret giving my life to the god of war. Not once. I was remade into his weapon on that day. I am a weapon, Antoinette. Then, now, and forever. It’s a purpose I like. Not one Shannon did. She told me the vow didn’t matter, and that I needed to become something better. But I can’t. Maybe if Lilibeth had survived... But without her, I don’t see a way to be anything else. I don’t see myself being content as anything else. I want to be a weapon.”

Aurili

She'd said more than she meant to. She'd also horrified the sister. She hadn't meant to. She'd got caught up in the moment, in the emotion of it all. Like so many times in her past, she wished she didn't have to feel anything. She wished the hell she'd experienced as a child had actually stripped them away like so many people believed.

With the death of Lilibeth, all that was gone. Instead of losing her emotions, she was losing all the walls she'd built up over the years. Everything she'd used to make her seem like a well-adjusted and strong woman. Except she wasn't. She was a total wreck.

You could not spend your entire life fighting and dying and remain fine. It wasn't possible. If you thought you were, then you were waiting for the meltdown when everything would slide off into an immortal hellfire that would burn out your soul.

Despite it all, Aurili really did wish to just be a weapon. A tool to be aimed, and fired. It was a simpler way of thinking about life. It let you live guilt free. Never having to confront the consequences of your actions. It didn't matter if innocent people, if children, died. Because you weren't responsible, the person who controlled you did.

It was also a lie.

Aurili swallowed nervously, one hand on the hilt of her sword, "I'm a soldier. War is my purpose."

"Find a better one." Shannon glared, "You need to be better than this, Aurili. And I know you can be. The era of war is over. I'm not letting it out again. I won't let war become a part of the new pantheon. I'm just a servant of Sarin, now."

Aurili had burst into terrified tears when Shannon had said that. When she remembered a tenth of what she had done in the name of Balavid. Remembered frightened people cut down as she moved across a field. Not a field of battle. A field of grain. At the order of the king.

Aurili wiped her face quickly, and then sighed, "As you wish."

"No." Shannon smiled, grabbing her in a hug. "What I'd want isn't what you want. So you be the best you there can be, and we'll call it even."

The problem was, Aurili didn't have the faintest idea what the best her was. She'd thought it was a weapon. Wrocin himself had selected her to act as his weapon in the world. To be a force of war itself.

"Well. I guess if you survive the next few days you might get lucky."

Her last words. Instead of taking the moment like she wanted to. She'd tortured both of them by walking away from Lilibeth like that.

Without Lilibeth, there was no best Aurili. Because there wasn't an Aurili left alive. She was just a hollow shell. So hollow she latched onto the first purpose someone threw her way, even if it was insane.

"Shannon was just a low sister." Antoinette said at length, "She was made into the High Priestess by Sarin, without any preparation. She got handed a few miracles, and got told to avert the end of the fucking world."

The sister shook her head, "I let it go, once. Mytris liked me, Shannon got jealous. Do you know how I ended the pranks? I kissed her. Then we both got whipped for it. Shannon never

brought it up. So I let it go. I still regret it. We were both just idiots. There is nothing special about either of us. I mean that. We muddled through and nearly destroyed the world in the process.”

Antoinette glared at, still in tears, “Shannon caused the godsdamned calamity. Do you think your sins mean anything beside that? Thirty nine million. Seven hundred and eighty three thousand. Two hundred and three. That’s how many people died instantly. Millions more from the fallout.”

The sister breathed heavily, “Shannon inherited the mantle of war god, but not from Wrodin. She inherited it from Mytris. After she killed him. Killed her childhood friend. He didn’t come back. None of them did. Shannon killed them, and they stayed dead. You think you’re a fucking weapon? Shannon had the ultimate weapon. Would you have been proud to wield the calamity? Proud to watch the world wither and die because of you?”

Aurili didn’t know how to answer. She couldn’t. She didn’t know if she would be proud, and that scared her. She should be terrified to wipe humanity from the face of the world. She didn’t know if she’d smile as they burned.

Antoinette glared at the ground, as tears ran down her hair, dripping slowly. “Mytris cursed her. He cursed her to live, to fix what she had done. You’re cursed too, Aurili. Cursed to be more. You don’t get to die just because you want to. You don’t get to pretend you don’t have any responsibility. Your sins have been counted. You survived when the gods died. So now, it’s your job to fix it.”

Did she want to die? Is that all that this was? A final blaze of glory, going out beside the consort of a god. Dying so that some high purpose could be fulfilled. Maybe she had planned to die in battle. Maybe she was too much of a coward to kill herself.

“You don’t get to die.” Antoinette reiterated, “Do you understand? You haven’t earned it. Not yet. Be better.”

She collapsed onto her side, holding her legs as the tears came like a flood. Solid sobs rose and fell like waves, shaking her to her core. She couldn’t silence them. Couldn’t stop them. She knew she was supposed to be quiet, to be hiding from the incoming forces, but she couldn’t. Her chest just shook, like it was being hit by a carpet beater.

She was broken.

Just as broken as she had been in that dwergaz ruin when Wrodin found her.

Alfar

She hung upside down from a chain in the prison, watching Garmr sleeping nearby, kicking as he ran across the rooftops, chasing the butterfly that was bigger than him.

Butterflies float, just like those that weren't in the Void. Accused of dying but sneaking out. The brown eyed one may as well be speaking with brown sludge. She hadn't changed. Just grown more bitter, like mandrake.

She flipped upright, casting quickly. There wasn't enough. They needed more mandrake, ready to harvest. The bleeding would be bad. Would be days. For Astarte and Akheron. They were hope, they were next. She liked Astarte. Akheron and his explosions could fart a bubble.

Alfar's face flushed red as she remembered that she'd kissed him. That her tongue had burned as she pushed him against the tree. Akheron never gave up on her until he had, and then she nearly lost him. She fought her future, when she knew it. She didn't like knowing he was her future.

Alfar rubbed her eyes, trying to block out the memory. She didn't want to remember him that way, not before his birth. It wasn't fixed. He could die.

"What are you doing?" Alteo asked, looking into the cell. Alfar moaned, "Not kissing him. Definitely not kissing him ever. He's so annoying."

Alteo laughed, "This is the first I've heard of you having a boyfriend. When?"

"Oh, I don't know." Alfar sighed, "After the war of lightning. Not now. He isn't yet. He's an omelette. Gods he knew how to kiss. Ew. I don't like him."

Alteo leaned against the wall, grinning at her, "I have never seen you this flustered before. I have to say, it makes you look cute. What's his name?"

"Akheron." Alfar said bitterly, "You never met him."

Alteo frowned, "That's... A demon name. Wyrdrin. Are you seriously going to date a demon? You're an elf. I don't think any elf has ever seriously dated outside their race before. Well, one or two."

Alfar glared at her, "That's racist."

Alteo rolled her eyes, "That wasn't a no. Is he cute at least?"

"He's rude, and obnoxious and blows everything up." Alfar growled and winced, "And I'm pretty sure he's not alive yet."

Alteo sighed, "Ah, young love. Nice and confusing. Elfin live until they die. You might not even meet him for another thousand years. Demons are eternal too, aren't they?"

Alfar moaned, "But I don't want to like him. Or remember kissing him. Not now. Not the omelette."

Alteo shrugged, "So, change the subject?"

"Lightning is coming." Alfar said, feeling relief for the distraction of the memory of his hands. "The war of lightning. They came by boat. No one expected them by boat. They'll be mad. They liked the Fae."

"Zanfir." Alteo winced, "What will they do when they find out that Kru is dead? Overreaction seems the right response from them."

"Priestess is hopping." Alfar smiled, "One, two, buckle and shoe!"

Alteo shook her head, “Nope. Didn’t follow that one at all.”

“The buckle is like the buckler. Bronze and shiny. The soldier is without hope. She needs some. We need to share it, or it won’t work.” Alfar said with concern, “We need Aurili. She has to hope.”

Alteo nodded, “Leave it with me.”

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Dyys

Selene sideswiped her.

She hit the ground rolling, and screamed in agony as a stone touched her stomach, and it felt like Fel exploded all over her, through every nerves in her body. She vomited, but it wasn't just tar this time. It was blood and clear fluid. And it didn't stop. It just kept coming.

The Hekate looked down at her with that fucking smile, "Curious. I intended only to disable you. Is it possible I injured you? I simply wished to discuss the danger you present me, and every living inhabitant of this world. One of your skills and knowledge cannot afford to be captured by Ausosa, yet you are determined to face her head on."

Dyys vomited blood in her direction. She couldn't be much else. Could hardly speak in this condition. She had an inkling of what might be wrong, but was praying to every single god that might still be alive that she was wrong, begging them. Begging them that she wasn't about to lose it. To lose everything that was left of her and Bel.

"What the goddamn fuck do you want, demon!?" A voice roared, and Dyys looked up as she vomited. The blazing glory of Trei faded slowly, and he looked at her suddenly with concern and sadness, "Oh gods. Dyys. How did this happen?"

She waved her head at her companion. The Hekate smiled sweetly, right as Trei planted a fist in her face and sent her tumbling. He looked around, "We need a dry place, that's close. Be Liphu has a fortress. It'll have to do."

The god picked her up quickly, causing Dyys to writhe in pain, the magic arcing through her body like electricity, burning everything around them. She didn't even notice the shift this time, she was in too much pain, screaming as the blood and tar in her throat tried to drown her. She didn't hear what happened next. The pain blinded out everything, the pain and the anxiety.

The fear was greater than the pain. She couldn't lose this. This fight was hers, and she would not give up. If she lost this, she was done. There was no future, not if this was true. It couldn't be. She didn't know how it could be, but it was. She knew it. She didn't know how, but she knew it right down to her core.

Bel had fixated on one word in Yio's explanation, "Egg?"

"Yeah. We'll move on after this, but she can lay eggs." Yio said, glancing at Dyys.

She'd known. Yio had known and thought that Dyys had as well. She'd been trying to save Dyys the embarrassment of explaining to Bel that she was already pregnant and hadn't told her yet. Kregstad! Why were gods so thoughtful and mighty and missing every damn thing in front of their faces! It wasn't like Dyys had a period to tell her when she had or hadn't fertilised her eggs. They didn't usually exist. She had to grow them. She hadn't noticed. Hadn't noticed a thing.

This was too soon. She couldn't be giving birth now. They wouldn't survive. The incubation period was... Well she didn't have a clue what the incubation period was. She'd never been pregnant before. Alexis hadn't. She knew that she knew it, but she couldn't remember it, not with the raw magic trying to rip a new hole in her stomach. She knew it wasn't a few weeks, which is what it had to be if the only time she'd managed to sleep with Bel was the trigger for her hormones to fuck with her.

"Ashwen! Towels!" She heard Trei screaming urgently, "Talin, where the fuck is my scrip!? She's about to bleed out here!"

The voice was distant, and though she was panicking, she didn't feel the panic from him. It was like a dream. Like she was drifting and falling on a current determined to drown her. Voices shouting where nothing but the background noise of the sea, the violent sea as it twisted her and pulled her down.

"Mandrake, now!" Trei's voice was barely a whisper.

She felt something slimy, full of chunks move into her throat, and something forced her to swallow. It hit her blood stream as the plant dissolved and entered the blood stream instantly. She sat up screaming as the pain slammed back into her in full force, scattering tears as she did.

A strong hand forced her down, and she screamed in agony as her stomach protested. They were gutting her open. Cutting her to pieces. It didn't make sense. Why were they pulling her apart? Was she going to become the next meal served to the gods? What about Bel? Was she safe? Where was Bel? Had they got to her? She had to save Bel!

She tried to stand up, but the hands grabbing her were impossibly strong, like stone. They'd bound in place. They were trying to bind her. Make her their slave. She couldn't be. She wouldn't allow it. She only served one master, and she would only ever serve one master.

The pain hit her again, and she vomited black and red into the air. She was dying here. Dying, and no one seemed to care that her children would die with her. Gods. Bel was gone. Her stomach rolled as she burst into tears.

"Stay with me." Trei growled, "Come on, Dyys. You can do this. Hang in there. Ashwen, how are they doing?"

She didn't understand the response. Why were they speaking in Faen? What were they hiding from her? They were stealing her children! Dyys hair flared to life and the ground began to shake as the magic poured into her. She'd grabbed a hold of the lifestream itself. If this is what it took to save her children, then that is what she would do.

"Calm down." Trei instructed, his black eyes appearing, locked on hers, "They're fine. I'm trying to save you, so please don't turn me into a crater."

Dyys bottom lip wobbled and she nodded, sniffing.

"This is going to hurt." Trei instructed, out of sight. Dyys went to ask him what would when a razor-sharp pain slammed between her legs. Which immediately closed around whatever was down there like a steel trap. She heard Trei screaming obscenities in a muffled sort of way, and felt hands on her shoulders, "Ssh. It's okay. Go to sleep."

She wanted to argue with Hekate, but she couldn't. Selene's magic was that of her people. The moment she pushed the restive thoughts on her, Dyys collapsed.

The sleep didn't last.

She tumbled out of control, out of her body. She was travelling through the Void faster than she'd ever moved in her life. She couldn't see anything. The stars that usually guided the way, the gods, were gone. The endless sky was dark and empty. She was lost, and she didn't know how to find her way back home. She was scared. So scared.

She felt a flick on the side of her head, impacting like a mallet. She spun around whirling, and saw someone smiling at her. Brilliant blue eyes. Swirling storms of turquoise and periwinkle. Kind, but fierce. Two hands moved in front of her slowly, making signs that Dyys recognised. "What the hell, idiot?"

She reached out desperately, trying to grab onto her, to hold onto her. The brunette knocked aside her hands, grinning at her, and shook her head. She held up her wrist, showing a knot of glowing red hair, and tapped it. A promise made, a promise must be kept. A promise that Dyys would put her needs above her own. A promise that Dyys' life now belonged to her.

Dyys roared angrily, reaching out onto the Void, somehow curling the reality around her, bending it so she wasn't moving anymore. Forcing the perspective of all onlookers to change. Forcing the 'verse to change. To save her.

She gasped, sitting up, sweat pouring off her, and she grabbed her stomach, her eyes watering at the agony. She swallowed weakly, feeling a dry and swollen tongue. "H... He... Help."

A soft hand touched her forehead, and she felt something sickly sweet touch her tongue. It wasn't just sweet, it was also bitter. She nearly gagged on it, but felt her tongue responding slowly. She looked at the person next to her, trying to focus.

Trei smiled at her, wiping her forehead with a small hand towel, "I was worried we'd lost you for a minute there."

Dyys looked at him, trying not to burst into tears.

He shook his head, "They're fine. Really. They're sleeping. Let me sit you up."

He positioned an extra pillow behind her, gently pressing down on her stomach as he angled her up. At the far end of the bed, Dyys stared in wonder at the collection of vibrant colours, twisted into each other in a haphazard mess. It you weren't looking for it, you'd miss that it wasn't just a nest of snakes. That in the middle of it were two almost-human faces, nestled tightly against each other. Tiny hands outstretched to the other's mouth, providing comfort.

Trei smiled, and then laid her back down, "I'm sorry, you're badly hurt. And... And not everything is fine. Not everything went fine."

Dyys glared at him, speaking with a hoarse voice, "Speak plain, god."

He breathed out raggedly. "There were three. Not two."

Dyys stared at him in horror. He'd said they were fine. He'd promised. He said... Her thoughts spiralled off and she burst into tears. He clutched one of her hands with a desperate and blood-stained hand, "I'm sorry, Dyys. I did everything... He was human. I'm sorry. I..."

He gave up trying to put the pain to words. Dyys grabbed him, pulling him tight against her as she howled into his shoulder. Screaming. There was no words to express the pain she was feeling. Just this raw emotion. She could feel the world bending, been drawn by her pain. It couldn't resist. The pain of a mother made the entire world resonate at what she had lost.

She could feel Trei looking around in worry, but it didn't stop. The pain roared through her like a river. The building began to shake, dust beginning to fall, and still the pain didn't go away. It wasn't a pain that could ever heal or go away.

Trei

He stretched his neck as he put the unconscious Fury down on the bed gently. That had been closer than he wanted to admit. He didn't know what was going to run out first, her strength, or the structural integrity of the building. There wasn't a lot he could do in the situation. Dyys' emotions were rapidly fluctuating and her strength wasn't normal. She was a new mother. She could do anything if she was desperate enough. Well, almost anything. Which would probably end up killing her, but she'd still do it without anyone being able to stop her.

He walked into the nearby room, feeling himself keeping an ear out for the young ones. The twins. From triplets. He didn't know if he could have coped with something like that. It was a pain that could only be lived.

He looked at the benches in the anteroom, and smiled.

Ashwen was crashed out on one of them, face down on snoring. A bloodstained towel had been tossed over her shoulders, as if to keep her warm. Not exactly affectionate, but neither was it completely uncaring. She probably deserved it, after everything she had done.

Talin was curled into a ball on the other side of the hall, head propped on a hand, and gently bobbing as he flickered between awake and asleep. He looked cute like that. As if he wasn't a complete mess inside his head.

Trei flicked his wrist, a blanket appearing in it. He wrapped it around the Fae gently. He looked up in surprise, "Trei? Is she okay?"

He smiled and closed his eyes. Talin didn't even get to hear a response before he was asleep. It had been a long and difficult birth. All three of them had used far more magic than was strictly wise, given the circumstances.

Trei swapped the rag on Ashwen for another blanket. Then he turned and faced her. The woman waiting at the end of the hall, smiling. Her cheek was still red from where Trei had punched her two days ago. Punched her hard enough that he'd nearly killed her. He'd only saved her because he needed the extra pair of hands. Calm and steady hands.

He walked over slowly, glaring. It was time to have this conversation, even if he was exhausted. "So."

Selene cocked her head, "I already explained myself to Dyys. It was accidental. I was not aware of her condition. I was attempting to determine if she could resist the Fel well enough to take on Ausosa, as she wished."

Trei didn't say anything. Nothing positive, or negative. It wasn't his place. That was for Dyys to decide. She was the one who had suffered. He wasn't like the old gods. He lived in the world. He was a part of it, not judging it. He didn't have the right to act on the behalf of another.

He turned away and walked over to a bench, lying down next to Talin and dragging a blanket out of the air and over him. He fluffed a pillow out of nothing and let his head crash onto it. He was exhausted.

Which was precisely when he heard the footsteps he didn't want to hear. He had crash landed into a fortress with a dying and pregnant Fury, and forced them to give him a room. It had been in the closed wing, but all the same it wasn't a great way to start the relationship.

He sighed and sat up. The official paused in front of him. They were a butler of some sort. Proper, upright, human, and wearing white gloves. All the Solasian servants wore a similar outfit.

Something to do with racism in their past. Trei glared at him and put a hand to his lips, “They’re sleeping.”

The butler completely ignored him, “The king requests your presence.”

Trei snapped his fingers, and the man’s mouth vanished, melting and blending together into a single surface. He was exhausted. He wasn’t going to put up with this crap. Not if it meant waking two hungry baby Furies that would be missing their brother.

“I said, quiet.” Trei whispered as the man silently screamed, scrabbling at his face. “And I can see inside your head, tool. Wanting to kidnap the children the moment you distract me? Not going to happen. I’m a god. Do you really want my wrath, and the wrath of these Fae, coming down on your head? Do you want the wrath of their mother to destroy the entire kingdom? The continent?”

Trei glared, “Go tell the petty overlord here, that... You may have to write it down.”

He flopped back onto his side, onto the pillow and snuggled down into the warmth. It didn’t take long for Hekate to be standing over him, looking down with her golden eyes.

“What?”

Selene smiled, “Why do you care?”

Trei glared at her, “Why don’t you?”

The Hekate took a step backwards, as if it wasn’t something that had occurred to her. Hadn’t considered that caring about others might simply be part of living. That she was the one at fault, for not caring enough about Dyys.

Selene looked down, the colour fading from her eyes, “I do.”

Trei blinked in surprise, “Really?”

“I am at fault.” She said, the light completely fading from her eyes, “I cannot justify my actions, nor do I wish to. What I caused to take place is unacceptable.”

He’d never seen a Hekate get upset before, let alone direct all that anger and sadness inwards. He wondered if it would kill her. It just might. It was contrary to their nature, contrary to how F’rir designed them.

This was one of those moments when he found the celestials incredibly disturbing. F’rir had created the Hekate to destroy Yio’s Furies. That was their sole purpose, which meant that she’d left them incomplete. She’d actually abandoned them before she’d even achieved that goal. She got bored.

She got bored and left two thousand creatures with an obsessive purpose, and only partial implementations of a soul. Broken, fragmented. They didn’t have full emotional understanding or comprehension. Didn’t have a full sense of self-identity. They struggled to separate themselves from the world around them.

F’rir had assumed Yio would clean up her mess by executing them all, but her sister had let some of them live, pitying them. A handful lived because they were attempting to find what F’rir had failed to give them.

This was the result. Part human, part monster. The two natures couldn’t survive intact. Only one could be active at a time, causing a personality schism. Eventually her mind would fragment, and she’d fall apart. The various worlds of insanity would become her home, and she’d recognise them more than this one.

It might be a kindness simply to kill her now. He couldn't fix what had been done to her, because there wasn't anything wrong with her. Insanity was simply a part of who she was. Part of her nature.

That wasn't his choice to make. Gods made decisions like that everyday. He didn't. Every living thing had to make their own choices. He wouldn't get in the way. The old ways were gone.

Yet, by doing that, he'd opened the doorway for Ausosa to return. That was the problem with letting people make their own choices. Sometimes they made the wrong ones.

"I don't disagree." Trei stated. If he'd said it to anything else, it might have come across as cruel, or heartless. To Hekate it was a comfort. A confirmation that their understand of a situation wasn't flawed, that their mind was intact.

Selene nodded slowly and sat down beside the bench, smiling. She would still need to deal with her emotions of guilt at some point, but the human wasn't in command right now.

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His head jerked up as he heard a wailing that quickly became two.

Trei

He stretched his neck as he put the unconscious Fury down on the bed gently. That had been closer than he wanted to admit. He didn't know what was going to run out first, her strength, or the structural integrity of the building. There wasn't a lot he could do in the situation. Dyys' emotions were rapidly fluctuating and her strength wasn't normal. She was a new mother. She could do anything if she was desperate enough. Well, almost anything. Which would probably end up killing her, but she'd still do it without anyone being able to stop her.

He walked into the nearby room, feeling himself keeping an ear out for the young ones. The twins. From triplets. He didn't know if he could have coped with something like that. It was a pain that could only be lived.

He looked at the benches in the anteroom, and smiled.

Ashwen was crashed out on one of them, facedown on snoring. A bloodstained towel had been tossed over her shoulders, as if to keep her warm. Not exactly affectionate, but neither was it completely uncaring. She probably deserved it, after everything she had done.

Talin was curled into a ball on the other side of the hall, head propped on a hand, and gently bobbing as he flickered between awake and asleep. He looked cute like that. As if he wasn't a complete mess inside his head.

Trei flicked his wrist, a blanket appearing in it. He wrapped it around the Fae gently. He looked up in surprise, "Treï? Is she okay?"

He smiled and closed his eyes. Talin didn't even get to hear a response before he was asleep. It had been a long and difficult birth. All three of them had used far more magic than was strictly wise, given the circumstances.

Trei swapped the rag on Ashwen for another blanket. Then he turned and faced her. The woman waiting at the end of the hall, smiling. Her cheek was still red from where Trei had punched her two days ago. Punched her hard enough that he'd nearly killed her. He'd only saved her because he needed the extra pair of hands. Calm and steady hands.

He walked over slowly, glaring. It was time to have this conversation, even if he was exhausted. "So."

Selene cocked her head, "I already explained myself to Dyys. It was accidental. I was not aware of her condition. I was attempting to determine if she could resist the Fel well enough to take on Ausosa, as she wished."

Trei didn't say anything. Nothing positive, or negative. It wasn't his place. That was for Dyys to decide. She was the one who had suffered. He wasn't like the old gods. He lived in the world. He was a part of it, not judging it. He didn't have the right to act on the behalf of another.

He turned away and walked over to a bench, lying down next to Talin and dragging a blanket out of the air and over him. He fluffed a pillow out of nothing and let his head crash onto it. He was exhausted.

Which was precisely when he heard the footsteps he didn't want to hear. He had crash landed into a fortress with a dying and pregnant Fury, and forced them to give him a room. It had been in the closed wing, but all the same it wasn't a great way to start the relationship.

He sighed and sat up. The official paused in front of him. They were a butler of some sort. Proper, upright, human, and wearing white gloves. All the Solasian servants wore a similar outfit.

Something to do with racism in their past. Trei glared at him and put a hand to his lips, “They’re sleeping.”

The butler completely ignored him, “The king requests your presence.”

Trei snapped his fingers, and the man’s mouth vanished, melting and blending together into a single surface. He was exhausted. He wasn’t going to put up with this crap. Not if it meant waking two hungry baby Furies that would be missing their brother.

“I said, quiet.” Trei whispered as the man silently screamed, scrabbling at his face. “And I can see inside your head, tool. Wanting to kidnap the children the moment you distract me? Not going to happen. I’m a god. Do you really want my wrath, and the wrath of these Fae, coming down on your head? Do you want the wrath of their mother to destroy the entire kingdom? The continent?”

Trei glared, “Go tell the petty overlord here, that... You may have to write it down.”

He flopped back onto his side, onto the pillow and snuggled down into the warmth. It didn’t take long for Hekate to be standing over him, looking down with her golden eyes.

“What?”

Selene smiled, “Why do you care?”

Trei glared at her, “Why don’t you?”

The Hekate took a step backwards, as if it wasn’t something that had occurred to her. Hadn’t considered that caring about others might simply be part of living. That she was the one at fault, for not caring enough about Dyys.

Selene looked down, the colour fading from her eyes, “I do.”

Trei blinked in surprise, “Really?”

“I am at fault.” She said, the light completely fading from her eyes, “I cannot justify my actions, nor do I wish to. What I caused to take place is unacceptable.”

He’d never seen a Hekate get upset before, let alone direct all that anger and sadness inwards. He wondered if it would kill her. It just might. It was contrary to their nature, contrary to how F’rir designed them.

This was one of those moments when he found the celestials incredibly disturbing. F’rir had created the Hekate to destroy Yio’s Furies. That was their sole purpose, which meant that she’d left them incomplete. She’d actually abandoned them before she’d even achieved that goal. She got bored.

She got bored and left two thousand creatures with an obsessive purpose, and only partial implementations of a soul. Broken, fragmented. They didn’t have full emotional understanding or comprehension. Didn’t have a full sense of self-identity. They struggled to separate themselves from the world around them.

F’rir had assumed Yio would clean up her mess by executing them all, but her sister had let some of them live, pitying them. A handful lived because they were attempting to find what F’rir had failed to give them.

This was the result. Part human, part monster. The two natures couldn’t survive intact. Only one could be active at a time, causing a personality schism. Eventually her mind would fragment, and she’d fall apart. The various worlds of insanity would become her home, and she’d recognise them more than this one.

It might be a kindness simply to kill her now. He couldn't fix what had been done to her, because there wasn't anything wrong with her. Insanity was simply a part of who she was. Part of her nature.

That wasn't his choice to make. Gods made decisions like that everyday. He didn't. Every living thing had to make their own choices. He wouldn't get in the way. The old ways were gone.

Yet, by doing that, he'd opened the doorway for Ausosa to return. That was the problem with letting people make their own choices. Sometimes they made the wrong ones.

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Antoinette

She was exhausted, and the ex-praetor was less than useless. She'd spent two days in tears, whilst Antoinette tried to keep her quiet and out of sight as the army had made their way through the pass.

They didn't get to go to Seha Roz. The port was captured. The soldiers had been Zanfrian. Terrifying brutes in lightweight blue armour. Every single one of them appeared to be a mage. Every single one of them wore a storm stone in the centre of their cuirass.

Whoever was left to follow them would be high-tailing it back to the capital, but Balavid was lost. It was conquered.

She felt some guilt at that. She was still the Queen of Ozandius. She'd abandoned it, not even acknowledging the role, after the gods had been killed. She could only hope the people she'd left in charge would know how to prepare. Prepare for a war on two fronts, against a mage army the size of which the continent hadn't seen since Hero's time.

Zanfir was going to win this one. Ozandius didn't have a hope in hell. Nobody did. No wonder the Giwonsangukian Empire had surrendered and let them walk across their borders. The Empire had been closed for a thousand years, killing every foreigner. Yet, they just let Zanfir do whatever they wanted.

Now she knew why.

The army of twelve thousand that had to be at least to the border of Ozandius by now wasn't just an army. That was twelve thousand mages, trained in physical and magical combat, and armed with one of the rarest magical sources this world knew.

At least this continent. The West Continent existed, and if the military was anything to go by, it was every part as strange as the myths suggested. This world was already conquered, even if it didn't know it yet. And it would begin with the fall of Balavid, because the gods had been butchered.

Because Zanfir worshipped Kru, and Ausosa had killed her without a single hesitation.

She sighed, leaning gently on the horse, "Sheshahr, Aurili."

Atop the horse, the ex-praetor just nodded. She didn't feel anything. She was still a broken mess. A hollow shell of a person, barely aware of anything happening around her.

She felt a calming hand on her shoulder, squeezing reassuringly, "You're almost there. You did it, Netta."

Antoinette touched her shoulder where she'd felt the hand, thanking the ghost or whatever it was that had been with her as she'd held her breath, waiting for Zanfrian soldiers to find and kill them.

She still wasn't convinced it was Shannon, or that she wasn't crazy, but she relied on it. It was a comfort, where there was none. The world really was coming to an end.

However, there was one small glimmer of hope. If she destroyed the shrines, then magic would go with it. The storm stones would hold a charge, but they'd never recharge. Maybe Falenthia or Danren could survive long enough to hold off the attack. Maybe Nal'farah. Everyone else was doomed either way. To be enslaved, like she'd seen Seha Roz enslaved. Every single citizen, in chains, being lead to ships.

Antoinette fought back tears. That had been horrifying to watch, but there was exactly nothing

she could do about it. She was a single mage, and it would take a demigod to fight an army of that size. No use her getting dead.

If she could find the shrines, and break them, she had to stay alive. She could find a way to end this. The world needed her to make it through.

Aurili looked up, and spoke for the first time, "What are those flags?"

She wasn't wrong. Antoinette had seen them, "Zanfir."

Aurili winced and slipped down from the horse, and patted her softly, before she started dumping bags on the ground. She kissed the horse, and then nodded, "Go home, Finnia."

The horse moved away, and Antoinette shouldered a pack, "I know we can't bring her with us, but will she be okay?"

"Probably not." Aurili replied, "But its the best we can do."

Antoinette hated this. Hated the hollowness of the woman with her. A woman who had given up.

"Can you swim?" Antoinette asked as they hiked along.

Aurili nodded stiffly.

"I need more than that." Antoinette growled, "We'll appear underwater, disoriented and probably wanting to throw up. Gateway travel sucks. Feels like being ripped to pieces. Worse, really. The Fae call it Splitting."

Aurili shrugged, "I can swim well enough. It sounds horrible."

She wanted to slap the woman back into the world, but she doubted it would work. Still made her palm itch.

Aurili

She was lost. Her thoughts fell apart before they reached any conclusions. She was simply too tired to keep going. She had only ever been a weapon. She didn't know how to be anything else.

Even as a weapon, she was useless. She wouldn't be able to stop the Zanfrian invasion. All she could do is die, if she opposed them. If Ausosa turned up, she would die.

She was useless. That was the only truth to who she was.

It didn't matter how strong she was, or how skilled she was. She could pick up any weapon and match a master. She could kill any soldier that came against her. She was one of the strongest people she knew. Able to hold her own against species inherently stronger than humans.

None of that mattered. The thought that it had mattered was a lie she'd told herself, to justify how she lived her life. Justified being nothing more than a mass murderer.

She drew the bowstring to her cheek, watching as Antoinette moved deftly along the edge of the city wall, grabbing tiny handholds, moving towards the outcropping in the wall, from where you could fall into the underwater ruins.

A soldier leaned forward, about to look down the wall to the noise he could obviously hear. The arrow pierced his jugular, stopping him from crying out as the second pierced a hand and pinned him to the wall. The third went into his heart. He died, looking like he was watching the horizon.

Aurili drew another arrow, watching without thought or passion. This was something she was good at, but she didn't enjoy it anymore. She couldn't. She was a nothing, as she had always been.

The alarm sounded as a soldier went down, a five-arrow barrage slamming into his chest. She hoped Antoinette could hear it, know that her time was running out.

Aurili sprinted and jumped over the cliff, hooking her bow onto the same line that had sent Antoinette over. An arrow whistled by her ear as she was spotted. Hopefully she was a distraction from the sister.

She hit the edge of the wall, but instead of climbing around, she dragged herself up. Three arrows loosed from her hand and into the skull of the first soldier that ran towards her.

The bow slammed onto her back, and she drew her new bronze sword quickly. The buckler took the first blow, before she batted his sword aside and the top of her blade pierced his throat. She knocked the body back.

The Zanfrians moved quickly. Lightning blitzed the air, and she tasted the awful smell as it scorched a path towards her.

Her body went haywire as a strike found its target. She fell to the ground, twitching as her muscles flailed.

She hadn't meant to die. She'd meant to fight her way to Antoinette's side, and die as she allowed the princess to escape through the Gateway. This was a pathetic death. A useless death.

"Get up, you piece of trash!" His voice shattered her mind, and she found herself on her knees.

The grey tiles in front of her were stained with blood. Red rivulets running around them. She looked up in fear, staring at the black-haired monster of a man in front of her.

He was tall, his shoulders broad. His eyes burned with fire, and there was an axe leaning across one arm. He glared down at her, "I gave you an order, twerp!"

She didn't know what to say. She wasn't allowed to speak, but she wasn't strong enough to stand. She couldn't comply with her orders.

"The trash of the Balavidian Empire." The man mused, reaching down and gently grasping her arm, pulling her upright. "Trash is worthless to them. Not to me. You are something worth paying attention to, child."

She was a child in some ways, and not in others. That was why it had been so easy to sacrifice her, to let her die in this ruin, so far from home.

The warrior in front of her knelt so he met her eye level, "Can you see the dark?"

She shook her head timidly.

His axe came crashing down beside her, and she gasped as the world flooded into view, in full detail. She could see the blood trail she'd left as she tried to flee the traps and spiders.

"I asked you, can you see in the dark?" He demanded and she nodded, in awe.

He grinned at her, "Good. Because when you can see in the dark, you can always find your way home. That's what it means to be a soldier. To find your way home again."

She swallowed nervously, "You're a god."

"Wrodin." He replied, grinning, "And I like you."

"I vow to serve you." She said quickly, and he rolled his eyes, "You can't just say that. It has to mean something. You have to offer something. I've already saved your life, so giving it away would be kind of insulting."

Her mind frantically scrambled for something, anything, she could offer. "Girls!"

Wrodin blinked in surprise, "What?"

"I... I like girls." Aurili said sheepishly, "I'll give that up. For you."

Wrodin sighed, "A vow of celibacy. That's an old one. It's a cruel life. Are you certain? You will regret this."

Aurili nodded stiffly, "I have to. I have to serve you. I have to get stronger."

"You're as strong as you need to be." Wrodin grinned at her, "But, I gladly make you my champion. Remember what it means to be a soldier. Find your way home. Take her, home."

Aurili's eyes watered as the lightning surged through her, and she glared up at the empty sky, hearing Wrodin's voice echo again in her head. She'd forgotten. Forgot that being a soldier didn't mean being a weapon.

It meant defending something, and then coming home to it.

She launched to her feet, hand tightening around her sword as her muscles twitched. She glared at the Zanfrian soldiers who looked at her in surprise.

She moved forward quickly. Her legs screaming with every step, but still she did it. Because she wasn't a weapon, she was a soldier, and a champion of war.

Shannon might have inherited war, but she didn't understand it. Didn't understand that she was a representation of it. That her willingness to stand up and defend anyone, regardless of whether she knew them, was the point of war. It was a defence, to protect those that you care about. At any cost.

Aurili's blade slammed into the soldier and carved through the armour and halfway into the soldier before it jammed. She kicked the dying man backwards as she spun and grabbed a nearby mage, headbutting them.

She snatched their sword, a decent longsword, and blocked the one trying to skewer her. She twirled around it and ended the woman cleanly.

Aurili had not fought like this in years. She moved slower than the soldiers, but she could anticipate every single move they made. She carved through them as if none of them were even alive. Their attacks against her failed before they even began. Her blows tore her weapons apart.

She smiled.

She was walking with Wrodin.

She was war, and she would save Antoinette.

Alfar

She held up her arms as the giant rough tongue coated her entire head with drool. “No! No! Stop!”

Alfar rolled aside, looking up at Garmr bouncing, ready to play. She glared, “Ew. And no. You know I’m busy today.”

The hellhound let out a long drawn out moan. Alfar stood up, putting her hands on her hips, glaring at him. She stood there, half her hair standing up and stuck together, as an entirely unintimidating figure. The hellhound sat down slowly with a thump.

Alfar nodded, and then turned and headed for the shower. Today was an exciting day. Today was the day Talin had pancakes. The day the Gateway would open. They would need her help, to direct them. Delicate magic. Thankfully she’d already watched someone do it before and remembered how. Remembered herself cast the spell.

Unfortunately, today was also the day Akheron learned to jump, which was going to hurt her head as he rewrote the future. He didn’t shift, channel or split. Akheron invented his own magic, as was his way. He was one of the Hellbound Twins. They were the history writers. Made it hard for her who saw everything that was and could be when he turned around and invented a new branching timeline.

The hot water poured down her, relaxing her tired muscles, and cleaning the gunk out of her hair. Alfar steadied herself with a hand against a wall. She knew why she was so anxious.

They were converging. A fixed event was almost here. She didn’t like things that were fixed. They were inevitabilities, things you couldn’t fight. These were the easiest things to hear as a prophecy, and the worst to live. All paths, all actions, lead to a fixed event.

The death of Antoinette.

Queen of Ozandius, Third Princess of Yurk, pseualf. The whispers were leading her to this moment, and she didn’t like it. She wouldn’t have a chance to be her friend, but she liked her. It hurt to know what was going to happen to her.

The betrayal was theirs, and hers. There was no path but this one to take. She would die, and he would return, and then the worlds would end.

That could not be prevented.

The only chance at all was Aurili, to take the future and stuff it inside the hopeless warrior, to give her tears of the future. She would love and she would hate and then the next could come.

Alfar coated her hair, cleaning it slowly, taking her time in the shower. She was delaying, but she could afford to delay. There was not yet a time that demanded her. Much would depend on her actions soon, and she could only hope she could remember to take them. Remember when she was, so she could remember the day that was.

She had to remember this day, and the importance of it. To protect Aurili above all other risks. To guide her towards the shining light of her own destiny, and to the truth of who she was.

She held up some of her hair, looking at it. At first glance it might appear blonde, like most elfin, but it wasn’t. There were strands of white and black mixed amongst it, giving the impression her hair was dirtier than it was. The strands were fine, but a reminder of who she was.

She was not just an elf, she was the elf whose perspective had been taken from her by an angry god. A god who wishes that Alfar should no longer be allowed her sanity, because she would one

day pose a danger to them. A danger that she was now coming to pose.

She didn't want to be a danger, she never had. The Fae would appear on her hundredth birthday, and take her mind from her. It didn't matter that all Alfar wanted was to play with her hellhound, to be left alone. What mattered was that she saw everything. The past, the future. She saw Balavid, and she saw Summer's garden. She knew everything that was, that would be. Everything that could be and everything that must be.

To the secret god, she was hellfire. They couldn't kill her, she was necessary for an event. This fixed event. Today. Today was that event. After this, the god could finally consider her death again. Her own actions would decide if that timeline became what the others would remember.

She already remembered her death from it. She had been sad, dying as Garmr licked her face, begging her to play. To not be not.

Alfar stepped out of the shower, towelling her hair, and smiled at the giant face framed in the doorway, unable to enter. She picked a treat from off a nearby shelf and tossed it to him.

"Alfar? Are you ready?" Alteo called from the bedroom door, and she sighed, "Yes. I'm eating breakfast. Sorry. No. Still dressing."

Dyys

She sat weakly, holding her screaming stomach, looking at the two wrapped around each other. She was sitting cross-legged, and her children had decided to nest there.

Her children.

She smiled, wanting to reach down and touch them, but not feeling like getting bitten by their uncontrolled hair just yet. She couldn't remember being this young. They looked different than her. They didn't have legs, they had a tail. It would eventually split, in a few weeks time, and that was when they'd become fully independent.

She didn't know it from herself, but from remembering the births of other Furies, whilst serving in the Hall of the Hells. All the same, this felt completely different. Not just because she was their mother. The aura of her children was different.

Trei knocked, entering slowly.

She smiled at him and waved him over, "They're sleeping."

He sighed, "You should be lying down. You may not have external scars, but you have plenty of internal ones. Too many."

Dyys stuck her tongue out at him, and then looked down again. "They're beautiful. A brother, and sister."

Trei sat gently on the edge of the bed, "Why do I feel like I probably just look like a meal to your kids?"

"Because you do." Dyys laughed, instantly regretting it. She leaned back onto the pillow weakly, "Furies are very emotional creatures. Right now, they have the full spectrum of emotions I experience, but without the skill to control it. Hunger is ravenous. Irritation is wrath. Sadness is suicidal depression."

Trei nodded, "It must have been difficult."

"I don't remember my childhood." Dyys waved, "That was thousands of years ago."

Trei smiled weakly at her, "So, how are you coping?"

"I'm twelve thousand years old." Dyys said gently, "I've only spent the last thousand as a slave to Hero. My best friend had been born a thousand years before that... I spent the first five thousand years of my life fighting the Hekate... For the first time, ever, I have children."

She wiped tears from her cheek, "How... How did I have a human child? Trei?"

He nodded, leaning back, "You're right. For the most part, the eggs come from you. But that would lead to genetic degradation, eventually. So, at some point, you took someone else's genetic information, and incorporated it into your children. All three of your children were part human. Unfortunately, he was mostly human."

Dyys nodded, biting her lip, "How long is a human pregnancy?"

"Ten months."

She looked at him in surprise, "Oh. Ew. How do they stand it?"

Trei laughed, "With difficulty."

Dyys winced, "The king is going to try and take his body."

“Mayor.” Trei corrected, “And yes. But he won’t. I won’t let him near you, or any of yours. We’ll bury him, where no one can find him, or abuse him.”

Dyys smiled and looked back down at them, “Will they have a world to grow up in, Trei?”

“Yes.” He replied certainly, and she looked at him in surprise, “Really? With every other god dead, and the lifestream corrupted?”

“They won’t die, even if the world does.” Trei replied hesitantly, “They can survive in the Void.”

Dyys glared, “How is that possible? I couldn’t.”

“Alexus couldn’t.” He corrected gently, “You could, and have. You projected yourself into the Void whilst you were giving birth. Your children have the part of you that isn’t in any other Fury. You’re the oldest Fury. The first. Yio made you as a template.”

Dyys swallowed nervously, “So I have the touch of the divine. And so do they. You didn’t want to tell me.”

Trei shrugged, “No. But I needed to. You’re a target now, Dyys. Of Ausosa’s.”

“I know.” Dyys snapped, “She’s been trying to kill me since before the banquet. Mostly Fel-infected orks. And infecting me with the Fel.”

Trei grinned, “There’s some good news. How are you feeling?”

Dyys blinked, “I’m hurting but... I’m clean. The corruption is gone. How is that possible? I didn’t lose my magic. I should still be connected to the lifestream.”

“Thank your kids.” He nodded, “Birth boosted your immune system. It won’t last, but for now, your body is fighting the Fel faster than it can spread. As for them... They’re getting their magic from you. When you eventually get reinfected, you will pass it on. Hopefully we can do something about it before then.”

Dyys sighed tiredly, staring at the ceiling, “I just wanted to hunt her down. To kill her for what she’s done.”

Trei shrugged, “Me too. Life has other ideas.”

“She lived here, Trei. In Be Liphu. A few hundred years ago.” Dyys sighed, “But that is the closest I’ve come... How did she do it? How did no one know she was alive?”

“She was supposed to be alive.” Trei replied, “She was just supposed to be in hell, as well. Hero was her warden.”

Dyys glared at him, “The gods gave us to him, didn’t they?”

“Yes.”

She ground her fangs together angrily, and leaned back, “Gods do anything they feel like. Always. We’re not people to you, are we? Pawns to play with. We’re just pieces to be moved around, in this infernal and eternal game you play amongst yourselves. Ausosa was right about one thing. The world doesn’t need the gods.”

“I know.” He replied standing up, “Have you seen me commanding nations, building new species or worlds? Or standing beside my wife?”

Dyys shook her head, “Then where is mine? Where is my master, Trei? Nothing you say or do can make up for it.”

“Bel was strong.” Trei said weakly, “The best anyone can do is remember her for who she was. One of us will kill Ausosa, Dyys. One day. On that day, both of us will make her regret hurting your wife, and mine.”

She nodded. She understood him now. He wasn’t the god he acted as. He was human, which meant he understood the rage she felt. He couldn’t feel it as intensely as a Fury, but he felt it, and would turn it into action.

One of the kids yawned, opening her eyes. She slithered up, sitting on Dyys’ chest, and glared at her. The child pointed at her stomach, eyes burning a brilliant red.

Dyys snapped her fingers, and a rat dropped from the air, sprinting for the doorway. Her daughter shot across the room, slamming into it with a crack of bones before it could get any distance at all.

The other Fury opened his eyes. Dyys smiled at him, “You hungry, too?”

Trei

He handed a plate of pancakes to Talin as he sat up tiredly. The Fae sniffed, and looked down in slight confusion. “What... Is it?”

“Syrup of the maple tree.” Trei replied, “Over a wheat-based product humans like. They eat it this way. Summer didn’t mind it. Luna found it... Addictive.”

Talin took the fork and tore off a piece and nibbled at it in slight confusion. His eyes lit up.

Trei turned and passed another plate to Ashwen, who was shivering in a cocoon of clothes and blanket. She hadn’t been so tired as to not move in her sleep, and was now probably trying to work out how to get re-dressed without anyone noticing.

“We’ll be heading home tomorrow.” Trei announced, “Selene and Dyys will stay here. They’ve found some clues to Ausosa’s whereabouts.”

Ashwen frowned, “Won’t the mayor be a problem?”

Selene shook her head, “No. If that bastard tries to touch any of them I’ll rip him a new one.”

Ashwen grinned at the anger, “You should let the human out more often, it’s so much sexier.”

Selene clenched her fists, “Don’t talk to me, Fae. I know what you did.”

Ashwen’s face fell, and Trei glanced around, wondering if he was about to have a fight on his hands. Talin was reserved, keeping his place. Probably understanding the flood of emotions that Selene was feeling.

“Sorry.” The Hekate growled, “I had a friend at Calis. Well, as close to friends as I make, anyway. Holy hell. How do people cope with emotions? I don’t whether to cry or punch a hole in a wall.”

Ashwen looked up, “I’m sorry. I do know what it’s like to lose control. It made me hate myself.”

Selene visibly bit back a retort. Trei smiled, relaxing. She was getting better at controlling herself. She was a quick learner.

Talin finished eating, and looked up at Trei, “Does this mean I won’t get to see those crazy kids much?”

“Oh, count on it.”

Everyone turned, looking in surprise at Dyys leaning on the doorway. Trei sighed, “Do you think you should be moving around?”

“Yes.” She glared, and then sighed, “Also, Trei, I need your help. Akheron just... Jumped? I don’t know where. I can’t shift or anything like that.”

He stood up quickly, “Oh shit.”

Just what they needed. Tiny Fury children capable of inter-dimensional travel.

Antoinette

She tumbled around under the water, swept by the current. Striking stone in every direction. She knew it would be like this. All she could do was hold her breath and wait for the turbulence to stop.

Easier said than done when you were being tossed into what felt like a wall at speeds faster than you can sprint. Especially when you didn't have the slightest clue when this hellish journey would end.

Something sharp and solid struck her head, tearing the skin and feeling like it might have done something worse to the skull beneath it. Bubbles flew from Antoinette's mouth as she was propelled along the corridor.

She grabbed the storm stone around her neck as the water closed in around her. She burst out of the water before she had a chance to call up a spell, and burst out coughing.

Antoinette dragged herself up the dark, cold and wet ground, hating her sister's outfit, with the heavy cotton. She spoke quietly, holding the crystal, "Aps esmi pora."

There was a sound like a fast running drain, and the water from her dress was floating in front of her like a bubble. She sat up, and flicked it, "Bhewmi leuks."

She flinched and shielded her face as the bubble of water became an orb of light. She shoved it into the air, letting go of the stone and rubbing her eyes, trying to adjust the brilliant light now bathing the entire underground cavern.

It was a cavern, and it was absolutely enormous. The roof towered overhead, higher than the temple at home. Higher than the roof of any man-made structure she had ever seen. Even with her bloody bright ball of light she couldn't make out most of the roof's surface. It was smooth, which made no sense to her. She could hear water dripping. There should have been stalactites.

Yet, looking at the floor, there were no matching formation for the dripping either. It was if the cavern was young, even though she knew it was older than most of the nations on the continent.

There was only one structure in the cavern. A ring, or half-ring, rising out of the ground and halfway up to the ceiling. The ring was segmented, formed of enormous and perfectly shaped cubes. They were too perfect, even to be carved from magic. They shouldn't have been as intact as they were. Age hadn't damaged them, nor had the myriad of attempts at activating the Gateway, or even the attempts to destroy the Gateway.

Each cube had a symbol carved into it, a single shape. She didn't recognise the language, which was a problem. She couldn't read the instructions. From what she'd read about the Gateways, no one had managed to full decipher the symbols, but partial success came with partial decoding.

The water exploded behind her with a gasp, and Antoinette looked over and stared, "Holy shit. Are you alive?"

Aurili looked at her torn armour and gaping flesh beneath it, already beginning to run red again, "I'll be fine. Activate the Gateway, they'll send attackers to follow us, soon."

Antoinette turned back, "I told you that might take some time."

The water splashes as if to tell her just how much the 'verse hated her. She heard Aurili let loose a battle roar, and attack. As the cry echoed, the entire cavern shook.

Resonance. The Gateway and the cavern, were designed to respond to a spoke phrase. The spoken phrase, written across it. It had to be Wyrddin, like the city names. The cities where the

gates were shared the name.

“Do you speak demon?” Antoinette shouted quickly, and Aurili grunted, before she heard another voice squeal in agony. “No. Why?”

Antoinette rolled her eyes, touch her storm stone and turning around. She blasted the Zanfirian with a bolt of lightning, striking them down. “Because the Gate opens for Wyrddin. I only know a handful of words.”

Aurili leaned on her knees, coating the ground with blood, “Don’t waste your magic on these idiots. Focus on the Gateway.”

She was right. They didn’t have magic to spare. She’d probably burn herself out if she tried to channel a second storm stone after the first. She had one shot at this one.

She spun back, focusing on the storm inside the stone, feeling it crackling across her skin, burning her. She shouted angrily at the cave, “En nomnajo deiwos, osmi id wer!”

Her voice distorted as it echoed back, the spell striking itself, twisting and distorting. Antoinette heard Aurili yell in pain, but she couldn’t turn to see why. She had to focus. Maintain the spell. Force it to take the shape she wanted it to.

Her voice snapped into clarity, the echo booming out solidly, “Chander, beshan, shahr!”

There was a roar of light, and Antoinette fell to the ground, completely blinded. The entire inner of the half-ring had become a beam of incredible light. Terrible light.

Antoinette felt around blindly, when she felt Aurili grab her and drag her upright, “Thank the gods I can see in the dark, or the light. Come along, princess.”

She felt the moment they touched the Gateway. She wished she hadn’t. This was the method of travel that the Fae referred to as Splitting. Every piece of substance that was you, soul, mind and body, was stripped apart into the smallest of components. It was not painless.

It was incredibly disorienting. There was no up, down or beside. No future, and no past. She could see everything and nothing. The entirety of the Void was moving through her mind. All of it. As she screamed, she moved passed Kao forming the very first land mass. The first piece of gravity amongst the dawning of creation. She saw Summer burning out and turning to crystal. She saw Tyr watching dispassionately from the side. She saw Trei standing over it all, sweating and cursing as he tried to hold things together.

Angry tears filled her vision as she saw Ausosa, standing and smiling as the lifestream turned black, a dead child hanging from one hand.

She saw the Fury launching at Ausosa, and she saw Ausosa die.

Antoinette hit the water on the other side of the Gateway.

Aurili

Antoinette had warned her that it was like a worse version of being ripped to pieces. She was wrong. It was nothing like being ripped to pieces. It was the worst thing that Aurili had ever experienced.

She could feel every single fragment of her being. Feel them all exploding as if they were hit by cannon fire. The pain reached far beyond her limits. If she had a voice she would lost it from screaming already. If she had a throat, she would have lost everything in her stomach. If she had eyes, they would be bleeding. It still felt like it was all happening, at once.

“Is this how the champion of Wrodin acts when she’s on her own?”

The pain didn’t stop, didn’t even decrease, but now she had a worse pain. She was starring at the woman she’d lost. Lost without even taking a chance on her. Lilibeth. Her pink eyes were sparkling in amusement, standing as if the entire ’verse wasn’t flying around them in a massive wave of ever changing dimensions.

Aurili tried to reach out for her, but she didn’t have hands or arms anymore. She didn’t even seem to have a body anymore. She was just stripped to pieces. Ripped apart and tantalised with visions of something she could never have.

Lilibeth rolled her eyes at her, “Seriously? You’re doubling down on the pity party. Where’s my praetor? The one who can shrug off gods? Get your ass up.”

Her praetor. Aurili wasn’t a praetor anymore. She didn’t know if she was more, or less. She didn’t know if it was a one time thing, standing on the wall. Fighting to save Antoinette. She did know she was still a warrior. She just didn’t know what kind.

She also knew she wanted Lilibeth back, more than anything in the ’verse. She’d give it all up. Go back to being just human, if it meant she could have her back.

Lilibeth put a hand on her shoulder, glaring at her, “There’s no such thing as just human. The moment you start believing that, you become less. It’s time to grow up, Aurili. If you want something... Fight for it.”

She tried to say something, anything.

Instead, she got a lungful of water pouring down her throat. She was twisting around wildly, darkness closing in at the edge of her vision. She was drowning, but she didn’t know up from down. She couldn’t hear or see anything, just the water.

At least the pain was starting to fade. Probably because of how tired she was feeling. How weak she was feeling.

Oh shit. She was dying.

A hand grabbed her arm, yanking so hard it wrenched out of its socket, and then she felt stone hit against her chest, and she was falling again. She scrambled with her good arm, barely grasping the edge, dragging her head above the waterline and coughed and vomited weakly.

She was too weak. Couldn’t drag herself up, couldn’t even keep her head above the waterline. Her fingers gave up, and she slipped back below the water, into the swirling dark.

Strong and rough hands grabbed her wrist and dragged.

Aurili coughed as the ground scraped against her face, unable to thank whoever had saved her. She clenched her fists, or tried to. She was too weak to even curl her fingers all the way.

A gentle hand patted her head, and she felt something warm running through her skull. She

hadn't even realised her cheeks were swollen until she felt it fading. It didn't give her any new strength, but someone was healing her.

It didn't feel like the way Carmichael used to. He'd made her feel so much worse every time he healed her. She hated the way he sleazed around, trying to get in her pants. Taking any excuse to see more of her skin.

It almost felt like someone was holding her. A gentle hug, protecting her from the horrors of the everyday. Not that she knew what the everyday was. That wasn't the life she'd chosen for herself as a kid. She'd chosen to be a god's champion.

Pink eyes flashed in front of her, along with a lop-sided grin, "Time to get up, Aurili. The mission is not yet complete, praetor."

She sat up with a start, and grabbed her chest as it burned. She blinked furiously. Lilibeth wasn't anywhere nearby. Antoinette was holding her, one hand on the storm stone, the other lit with a green light and pressed against her.

"Easy. You nearly drowned there."

Aurili blinked back tears, "I saw her. I saw her."

Antoinette hugged, chin on her shoulder, arms wrapped around her waist, "Shh. That's just the Splitting. Past, future, it's all the same."

"No." Aurili shook her head, "I saw her. Here."

Antoinette frowned, "Weird. Well, we aren't where I thought we'd be."

Aurili shrugged her off, glancing around, "This looks like... A palace?"

"It is." Antoinette sighed, "We're in some basement of a palace. I don't know where. Nowhere I've ever been, but those tapestries? The seal on the corner? Those are Mishia."

Aurili looked at the cold floor, rough but old. At the walls, which were covered in peeling wallpaper. At the moth-eaten tapestries. She stared at them, "Antoinette... Tell me you recognise those, too."

The sister shrugged, sitting next to her, "Prophecies, at a guess."

"That's Ausosa." Aurili growled, pointing at one, "Killing the gods. And the next in the series is you and me, standing beneath a mountain, being attacked by... Soldiers. Of every nation."

Antoinette nodded, "Yeah. This shit happens to me all the time. Don't try and interpret them, if they're prophecies, then they'll happen no matter what you try. If they're not, you're making things worse for no good reason."

She turned to the blonde in surprise, looking at her serious green eyes in disbelief. Aurili was the champion of a god and she had never been surrounded by their intervention like this. Hells, she had been in love with a prophet and barely heard a peep.

Antoinette shrugged, "The 'verse hates me. Or Shannon. What hits one of us tended to hit us... Both."

She trailed off at the end, biting her lip. Aurili knew the feeling. She couldn't think or say anything without it eating her up inside. Trying to drag her back down to that emptiness she'd felt.

"Why don't we find out where the hell we are?"

Alfar

“Are we at the prison yet?” She asked Alteo, who swallowed carefully, holding her muffin, “Say what?”

“You wanted to test Aurili.” Alfar replied, “Didn’t you? Or isn’t that yet?”

Alteo frowned, “I was waiting until they’re here. Are they here?”

“Today’s the day!” Alfar announced, and then looked sad, “Today’s the day the Fae have their picnic. Everybody is going to feel sad. It’ll be a real kick in the balls.”

“You don’t even have balls.” Alteo laughed, “So, I’m guessing you need to help her? Redirect the Gateway here?”

“All done.” Alfar yawned, “I did it on yesterday’s tomorrow. Earlier. Not now. Because you asked. We should go. Can Garmr come?”

“He has to stay out of sight.” Alteo sighed, standing up and stuffing the rest of her muffin in her mouth. Not exactly the ladylike behaviour of the leader of the Oracle, but Alteo had a thing for muffins.

Alfar could remember how angry she was when she’d given a tray to Garmr because she didn’t like raspberries. Alteo had been so angry that Alfar had decided not to do it.

The younger Sibyl stood up, stretching, “Fine. But Antoinette likes him. We need to be out of sight too. To see the pseualf. You taught me the invisible spell.”

Alteo laughed, “Did I just? And you’re not just planning to use that to sneak into the kitchen?”

“Already taught me.” Alfar smiled, “If you don’t want that timeline, it’s fine, but I already know it. Because you did teach me in the future.”

Alteo rolled her eyes, “That gets annoying sometimes.”

Alfar caught her arm, looking down at the ground, sad, “I don’t want you to go, Alteo. I like you. You’re there for me.”

The elder Sibyl touched her cheek, “Hey, I will be. I’m always there when you need me, Alfar.”

“No.” She said, voice shaking, “You died. You died protecting her. When he comes back. I don’t like it. I don’t want you to.”

Alteo put an arm around her, “Alfar... I’m so sorry you had to see that. My end isn’t here yet. I’ll do my best.”

“You have to die.” Alfar winced, “The events are fixed. That’s what is now. You died. You left me. It hurts.”

Alteo put her forehead against her, “We all do what we have to. We’re Sibyls.”

Alfar nodded, wiping away a tear, “I miss you.”

“I’m still here, for now.”

Alfar kissed her forehead, standing up, “Now, we need to go to the prison. To offer. Like the bitch is offering false peace to god.”

Alteo winced. There was only one person that Alfar referred to as the bitch. Only one person she hated in the entire 'verse. She disliked some people. People who mess with the timelines. Tyrsans and the like. They gave her headaches. But there was only one person she hated.

The woman who had cursed her, when she'd never wanted to be part of anything. She just wanted to be left alone, but because of that bitch, she was now in the centre of all events. Not just these, but the ones that no one else could remember yet.

Dyys

Astarte had jumped after her brother by the time Trei had located them, and jumped the two of them to the twins.

She looked around at the flowing green garden, as she heard the twins hunting through the bushes, and the squeals of joy from them, and terror from their prey, as they succeeded. “What is this place?”

“This is Summer’s garden.” Trei said slowly, in shock, “It... It was gone. Burned out, and then the realm itself collapsed. I have no idea how it’s back together.”

Dyys sat down, holding her stomach as she felt a stabbing pain, “It’s beautiful.”

Trei didn’t say anything, still caught by the shell shock of the realm even being intact, let alone alive and healthy again. It wouldn’t take him long to see what Dyys could see. There were still burned out places, but as the twins moved passed them, they faded.

Life was bleeding into the ground, everywhere they touched. She didn’t know how the twins knew of the existence of a realm that had actually collapsed, but she did know how they were healing it.

She could see their auras, they weren’t exactly hidden as they chased through the bushes. Auras of light and magic. Every time they touched the Fel it recoiled and died. The divine in them made them untouchable to it.

Dyys face blinked in surprise, “Trei. How the hell was Kru infected by the Fel?”

He glanced at her, “She wanted to be. She used it, before her ascension. Ripped it out of Drak’tur’s hands.”

“Gods can only willingly be infected.” Dyys nodded, “Ausosa wasn’t worried about the gods getting in her way. She wasn’t worried about a war. She was worried they would cure the Fel. Cure the lifestream.”

“I can’t cure it.” Trei sighed, “It regenerates too fast. The source of magic itself, there’s a considerable amount of power the Fel is feeding on, there.”

“But a dozen gods? The hundred or so celestials?” Dyys questioned, “They would be able to. And with a new treaty, they would have.”

He sat down slowly next to her, “So it wasn’t hatred that made her kill us.”

“She has a goal.” Dyys stated angrily, “All of this, every single part of it, is just a means to an end. What in the hell would require infecting the lifestream with the Fel?”

The god beside her looked at her carefully, “You have an idea?”

“I do.” Dyys nodded, “She didn’t come after Tyr, when he came back. Did she?”

“Sarin even tied a thread of fate to him after resurrecting him.” Trei replied, “I didn’t know why, didn’t ask... But it never attached to anything. To Ausosa.”

“She didn’t love him.” Dyys’ jaw tightened, “She loved the man who killed him. Who kickstarted this whole thing. She brought Tyr back, because he was hers... But I think the passion died after a thousand years in the tenth circle of hell.”

Trei sighed, “No one knows where Pheter was imprisoned. No one living. Talin still seems to think he’s alive. Ashwen doesn’t.”

“She was looking for him. In the mortal world.” Dyys replied, “She founded the city of Be Liphu. The Light, in Wyrrdin. She couldn’t find him, so she was showing him the way home.”

Trei screwed up his brow, “How does that even work?”

“Be Liphu has a Gateway. Like most of the old cities. The Gateways cross the Void, using light magic.” Dyys replied, “She was using them to send a signal through the Void, penetrating every realm. All she needed was someone listening for her signal.”

“He never came.” Trei shrugged, “So why infect the lifestream?”

Dyys shrugged, “I haven’t worked that out. It stretches everywhere. It’s darkness. Maybe she needs both light and darkness. Maybe she needed the power.”

Trei shook his head, “Neither make much sense. Why don’t you and the kids stay here? They seem happy.”

“They are.” She replied and shrugged, “But it won’t last. A few weeks and they’ll choose their own home, Trei. We’re Furies. We don’t have families, not for long.”

He shrugged, “They’re part human.”

“Not by much.” Dyys laughed as Astarte slithered out of the bushes with a cat-sized rat in her mouth, her red eyes beaming with excitement. She patted the girl’s head, and then she vanished again.

“Don’t try and compare us to humans, Trei. I love my kids, but letting go of them is part of growing up. In a few weeks, they will already have grown up. They’ll be as independent and sure of themselves as you are. They will for thousands of years. They might even outlive you. Judging them by any human metric is... Insanity.”

He went to say something when the ground rocked and there was an explosion of light and debris in the distance. He laughed softly as Akheron slid out of the undergrowth, holding his head as his hair tried to untangle itself and wipe the dirt away. “Point taken. Already using explosion magic.”

Dyys grinned, “We might not be as magical as Fae, but we are magical creatures, Trei. We eat, and live and breathe through magic. Toss our tempers into the mix, and you have an extremely interesting time.”

Trei frowned, “You ever babysat for another Fury?”

“Hell, no.” Dyys laughed, “I didn’t want any of that. Not... Not until Bel. Well, I wasn’t really thinking about kids. I just wanted her to own me.”

“Different cultures.” He whispered under his breath.

Dyys grinned, “You take care of the things you own, boy. I swore to protect her, to put her life before my own, because it is the exact opposite of the normal expectations. If she were stronger than me, I would have asked to be her master. There is a give and take. The equality comes, because the one who is supposed to be able to lash out and destroy the other, is the one who can’t.”

He shook his head, “It still feels weird to me.”

“It feels like someone cares to me.” Dyys snapped. She didn’t care what he thought. It was how she wanted things. To express that she trusted Bel not to hurt her, never to abuse her authority over her. She wanted Bel to smile in embarrassment as she did up her shoes for her. To sit there unsure of what to do as Dyys put her shirt on her. That nervous energy was a part of it. That Bel

would never have the expectation that Dyys would blindly serve her.

Gods she missed Bel.

Astarte suddenly slithered into her arms, coiling around one wrist, “Tel asid?”

She patted her daughter’s head, getting bitten by the irritable snakes for her efforts, “I just miss your other mum. It hurts. It’ll take me time to not be sad.”

Astarte screwed up her face, and Dyys thought she was about to scream angrily, and then the girl grabbed her chest and burst into tears into it. Dyys held her gently, tears appearing on her own face instantly. She didn’t have a chance with her mess of hormones, and now her daughter crying.

Trei stood up slowly, “I’ll... Be in the house.”

Astarte glared at his back, “Tek nuk fe’r asid.”

“Hey.” Dyys cautioned, “He’s allowed to be sad. He misses his daughter. And her mum. He hurts just as much as you do.”

Astarte pouted, and then rubbed her scales against her, tearing her top, “Muk’to.”

Mother. Dyys smiled through her blurry eyes at the word, the name. Such a bittersweet mix of emotions. She wished so much she was sharing it right now, that Astarte had someone to call Muk’da, but she’d also had the whole world made better just from that one word.

Something prodded her head, and she turned to see Akheron holding out a flower crown, studded with so many brilliantly bright colours it looked somewhat sickening. She took it and put it on her head with a smile. He curled up beside his sister, who slapped his face with her tail, sticking out her tongue at him as he tried to bite it.

She put her arms around the both of them, squeezing.

Trei

He was officially creeped out.

The house wasn't just intact, it was restored. The same books were on the shelf, with the same dogears and bookmarks. The fire was burning in the pit, and the same flowers were arranged on the table.

All of this had been destroyed beyond recovery. It had ceased to even exist. That's what happened when a realm disappeared, when it couldn't be maintained. Bringing it back like this was the power of a god... And it was a child who had done it. Two children.

It had taken Trei going through hell to finally understand what he was, and how to control the way he influenced the world. These children picked it up like it was nothing. He knew that Furies grew up fast, that they were the equivalent of a mature middle-aged adult by three weeks old.

Three days old, they were probably the equivalent of a six year old human. Except they were different. They matured differently. The emotions of a Fury would never come under complete control. They'd always lash out, always pout, always get hurt badly. They also picked up spells as easily as they picked up words. A human mage would train for years to get nowhere, whilst a Fury child would see it once, and that'd be enough for them to invent their own version of the spell.

Yio had designed them to be her living weapons. Capable of incredible imagination, and incredible possessiveness. To defend the shrines of the mortal plane. She'd succeeded, even if she had to divert them to trying to contain Ausosa.

Dyys' children were part old god, part Fury, and part human. They were almost what Ausosa had wanted Faith for. They were probably still something that could be sacrificed to gain incredible power. They had to be protected.

Trei didn't know if he could protect anyone, especially not these children who could sustain a realm at this young an age. Even most Fae couldn't sustain a realm.

He felt a tug on his trousers and turned. The Fury girl glared up at him angrily, and traced her tongue across her teeth, as if she was tasting something terrible. "So'r'y."

Trei smiled at her, "Thankyou, Astarte."

She stuck her tongue at him and turned and ran, disappearing into the air itself. Just opening a channel like it was the simplest thing in the 'verse. For her, it might actually be no more difficult than opening a door.

He sat down on the couch beside the fire, like he had so many times. Times when Luna had sat across from him, glaring. Times when Summer had flopped onto him. Times before that, when Astrian had tried to make him more human, and less of a monster. When Vastras had saved his life.

He missed it. The calm from those early days, when nothing seemed to matter. Where the only thing he had to do was to try and work out how to be himself. Re-learning how to walk after having his soul shoved back inside his crispy corpse. Extra crispy, thanks to a fireball from Vastras.

Dying was the best thing that had happened to him. Put him in Summer's path, and bound the two of them together. Now, she'd died, and it was the worst thing that ever happened to him.

Antoinette

The 'verse absolutely hated her. It took every opportunity it could to take away anything she loved. The world didn't just shit on her, it poured diarrhoea down from the skies like the world had just eaten something someone had dropped on a street corner.

She stretched, leaning into the chains binding her arms and suspending her off the ground, pulling the key from her hair. Just like it had happened last time. She dropped to the ground, rolling her exhausted shoulders. It had taken forever for the guards to walk away.

She yanked the gag from her mouth, and walked over to the cell door, and whispered to the lock as quietly as she could. "Osmi ghai-ke dhworis."

There was a click, and she smiled, pulling the door open quietly and stepped into the hallway, looking both ways. She rolled her eyes as she saw Aurili leaning on the wall, an unconscious guard on the ground in front of her. So that's why he was late on the round.

They were in Mishia. A kingdom that had closed their borders the moment Calis had gone up in flames. She had attempted to talk to them, engage them on trade talks with Ozandius, but after the calamity, Mishia wanted to deal with the outside world even less.

They would not be pleased to discover there was a permanent underwater portal to the palace, in their capital city, in the basement. In all likelihood, they'd probably try and attack Balavid to destroy the other side, and get slaughtered by Zanfir in the process.

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Antoinette frowned, "Disturbingly few. Even Ozandius would have managed to double that, but we put the barracks in the prison."

Aurili paused and then sighed, "Fuck."

She turned around, and waved a hand over the area, a rune appearing in the air in front of her momentarily. Two people who hadn't been there appeared, leaning against the walls.

One stepped forward, looking at her in surprise, "How does someone do that without a magical source?"

Antoinette shrugged. She didn't really know, but it was getting easier. Simpler. Since Shannon had been whispering to her, it had flowed easier. Maybe that was explanation enough.

The other mage whistled, and Aurili let out an irritated groan as something came padding into the hallway behind them, excitedly. The mage smiled, "This is Garmr. He's sweet, but will do whatever I say."

Antoinette peeked over her shoulder at the dog, and instantly she wished she hadn't. "That is not a fucking dog."

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Aurili's stance changed, moving slowly over the flat ground, "Garmr. He's a hellhound, isn't

he? Not just a wolf.”

The mage burst out into a grin, “See! I told you they’d recognise him!”

Antoinette looked from one to the other, “What the hell is this? An interview? I already have a job, thank you all the same.”

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The second dropped her hood as well, and Antoinette found her head couldn’t turn anymore sideways, “Elfin. What the fuck?”

Aurili spoke behind, “Wait, what?”

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She bowed, “My name’s Alfar. I have so been looking forward to meeting you!”

Aurili stepped in front of her, “Holy shit, they’re actually elfin.”

Antoinette grabbed the warrior’s shoulder, “Yeah. The First Sibyl is sort of like the queen here. Their government is a bit different, but close.”

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Alteo waved a hand, “Don’t sweat it. I came to see what you’re capable of, Aurili, and to meet you, Queen Antoinette.”

“Why is she calling you queen?” Aurili whispered angrily.

Antoinette sighed, “Sorry we didn’t send any messages ahead. I didn’t think we’d actually be coming here.”

“You travelled by Gateway.” Alteo nodded, “I had Alfar... Help. She helped guide the spell that transformed your words to unlock it. No point sending you to a place where the altar is already destroyed.”

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Alteo just rolled her eyes, “Fine.”

The excitable mage stepped forward, grabbing Antoinette’s hands, “We saw you. All the Sibyl. We saw you die, destroying the shrines. We didn’t like that. So, about a year ago, we started

destroying them. We knew you were doing it for a good reason. To save him. So, we wanted to help.”

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“Alfar, your people skills are as great as ever. Go play with Garmr.” The First Sibyl said with tired irritation, to which the Second happily obliged, cartwheeling down the hall to land with arms around the enormous wolf-like hound that seemed to have metallic fragments where most animals had fur.

Alteo leaned against the wall tiredly, “Sorry. She speaks well with the spirits. A favourite of the celestials. Her foresight is second to none, which unfortunately means she struggles to see the world in a linear fashion. Events don’t follow each other to her.”

Antoinette nodded, “Yeah. Still waiting.”

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“The gods are dead.” Aurili snapped, “And your people didn’t see that coming?”

“We couldn’t prevent it.” Alteo replied with equal anger, her ears flattening, “But we can undo it. Maybe. With the man imprisoned by the shrines. I know you’re angry, Aurili. Angry that Lilibeth died. I assure you, I would not have let her die if I could help it. She was a prophetess. She could have joined the Oracle as Sibyl if she wanted. Her loss means something to me.”

Antoinette sighed, “This shrine you can’t wreck, why do you think I can?”

“Because you’re you.” Alteo replied innocently.

Alfar giggled in the background, clearly being licked by her giant hellhound, “It’s because you’re a pseualf! Duh.”

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Aurili

Alteo had taken Antoinette out to see this magical shrine that nobody could get near, but the ex-soldier wasn't welcome, apparently. Instead she was walking along, beside the freaking hellhound, and the crazy elf doing a handstand on its head as it was moving.

Alfar grinned at her, "You are so cute. Lilibeth was right about you. Cute, but too scared to take action. Scared of yourself."

Aurili stopped turning to her, one eye twitching, "What did you say? You little bitch?"

Alfar flipped upright, crossing her legs, "Oh. Did I say something wrong?"

Aurili ground her teeth, glaring. She steadied her breathing, and spoke slowly, "I lost Lilibeth. No one gets to talk about her. Do you understand that? No one. Especially some freaking prophet who never met her."

"Not lost." Alfar smiled sweetly at her, "She's waiting for you. I've talked to her many times. She likes me more than you do. Calls me cute. Also calls me stupid. Cupid. I think that's funny."

Aurili blinked as she tried to process what the elf had said, and tried to keep her anger under control. She was extremely angry that the elf had ignored what she'd said and forged straight on ahead, but it was clear the elf wasn't all there. She really did have problems understanding time.

"Lilibeth is dead." Aurili said slowly, "Try and remember that."

"Not dead." Alfar pouted, her ears turning pink, "Waiting. For you. Just like she always has. Waited for you to get over yourself!"

Aurili twitched, and Alfar pointed an accusing finger, "Wrodin told you the regret. He warned you. All you had to do was ask. But you never did. Not once!"

"Shut up, kid." Aurili shook her head, turning away, "You don't know me."

"I do too." Alfar put her hands on her hips, "And just because I'm only two hundred and eleven does not mean I'm a kid."

Aurili coughed nervously, "Two hundred?"

"And eleven." Alfar growled petulantly.

Most humans barely lived to fifty. A rare few managed to make it to sixty. This elf who acted like a kid hyped up on toffee apples was more than twice as old as humans ever got. It even sounded like the others considered her young.

Aurili sighed, "I'm sorry. I don't really have any idea how important that age is."

Alfar blinked, "Oh. Of course. You're human, or you think you are. You might even be, I mean you were, and will be. Alteo is like a big sister to me, but she's everyone's big sister too. She's the youngest First Sibyl we've ever had. Seven hundred and fourteen. I celebrate her birthday every year."

Aurili laughed, shaking her head. "You're sweet. But please, don't try and tell me about me and Lilibeth. I am going to hit you if you keep it up."

"No." Alfar grinned at her, "You aren't. I've talked to her. Don't you want to?"

Aurili stared in shock, "What? She's dead."

"Not anymore!" Alfar shouted, "How thick are you, human!? I am not so disconnected from the flow of events that I can miss a resurrection."

Aurili fell to her knees. Her legs just gave out. The entire world was spinning. She couldn't focus, she couldn't breathe. It wasn't possible. It didn't make sense. Resurrection wasn't possible. Magic was poisoned, the gods were dead. So... That meant... That...

Alfar slid off her hellhound in front of her, smiling at her, "Don't look so sad. Lilibeth is waiting. You can tell her."

"She's Ausosa's bargaining chip." Aurili said slowly, tears appearing in her eyes, "Isn't she?"

Alfar frowned, "I don't know. Maybe? I just know she's waiting."

Aurili pushed herself upright, shaking, and swallowed, "Can you take me there?"

Alfar

She took Aurili's hand, and stepped sideways, skipping. She grinned as she saw the pink-eyed woman, "Hey! Time for tea!"

The soldier in front of her looked up with tear-filled eyes, standing slowly, staring in shock and awe. The hand slipped from Alfar's slowly, as Aurili nearly collapsed, her legs shaking. She stepped forward, reaching out fearfully.

Alfar smiled and blew a gust of wind into her, knocking Aurili into Lilibeth. The latter caught her easily, smiling lop-sidedly, "Praetor."

She spun on the spot, turning with a giggle as Garmr came bounding into this closed off part of reality wedged between the now and not-yet. He knocked her on her back, licking her. She hadn't told him she was going. That had probably scared the pup.

Alfar sat up, pulling a treat from a pocket she'd sewn into her robe, and tossed it into the air. The hellhound backflipped and snatched it out of the air.

"Alfar. Thank you." Aurili said, grabbing her shoulder.

She turned and shook her head, "No. Not yet. The bitch is coming. You have to talk to her first. This is her world."

Aurili looked at her in surprise, "The bitch?"

"She cursed me, you know." Alfar growled, "She will curse me on my hundredth birthday. Because she was scared. She cursed me, to try and take my happy. I don't like her."

Lilibeth laughed, "She's not kidding, Aurili. I don't know her that well, but Alfar is so nice. She's madder than Carmichael ever was, but she's kind. Unless she's talking about the bitch."

Aurili spun, "Who is it? Who is keeping you here, Lilibeth?"

"No idea." She shrugged, "Something... Grabbed me, as I died, and I woke up in this endless white space. Alone. I didn't even know I was still alive until Alfar came by."

"Garmr found you." Alfar smiled, patting the dog, "He likes you. Likes fighting with you. Tear the wings!"

Aurili sighed heavily, "When is she coming here? Do you know?"

Lilibeth face palmed. Alfar blinked, "I already told you. She's coming. Not yet."

Lilibeth laughed, "Aurili, she doesn't like repeating herself. Makes it harder to remember the difference between a particular future, and the now. If she says you have to talk to this person first, you're here until she turns up. Alfar is never wrong."

Aurili turned, "Wait. So when you said the First Sibyl was right, and you weren't, before?"

"I let her win." Alfar smiled, "She knows that. I'm nice. I let friends win sometimes."

"Unless it's cards." Lilibeth said with just a hint of bitterness, and Aurili laughed, "You played cards against someone who can see all of time and space?"

Lilibeth waved around her, "I don't exactly have guests. If she asks to play cards, I will play cards."

Alfar suddenly stood up, "Garmr and I have to go. You two have to kiss. Have fun."

She pulled herself atop the hellhound, her face hardening as she saw the world she was walking

into, the world she was remembering facing. There was no more room to be happy. That was the curse.

She didn't hear what the soldiers said. She didn't need to. She remembered their nervous energy at what she'd said, wondering if it was requirement. It wasn't, but she wanted them to have some happy before what was coming.

Garmr howled as he launched through the air, ripping through and landing atop the houses of Shahr. The burning houses. They were here. The lightning was arcing through the air, as ice and flames flew back to combat it.

Zanfir was invading.

Alfar leaned forward, kicking the side of the hellhound, "Let's go play."

There was no mirth in her voice this time.

Dyys

Astarte pounced on her chest, claws digging into some overly sensitive parts. Dyys yelped, and looked at her daughter, “Well, I’m awake. What is it?”

“Muk’da.” The little girl growled, her red eyes shining in the dark of the garden. Dyys looked over, and saw her son curled around himself, chewing his tail anxiously, but listening.

Dyys smiled, “Her name was Bel.”

Both sets of eyes instantly popped into giant saucers, completely enraptured by the thought of their other mother. Their auras went blank. They weren’t thinking, they were hanging on her every word.

“She was a farmhand.” She said slowly, remembering the first time she’d met her, “She tried to save the soil, even after it was dead. After the calamity hit. She was a tough one. Stubborn. Stronger than she looked. She was born without a voice. She used her hands.”

Astarte moved in closer as her brother dropped his tail from his mouth. Even the violent little hairs on their heads seemed to have quietened. To hear about their mother.

“She had brown hair, cut short. Practical. Deep blue eyes that always seemed to be telling me I was being an idiot. That telling her to go was a waste of breath.” Dyys grinned, remembering Bel refusing to leave in the dwergaz mine, “I fell for her, from almost the moment we met.”

Astarte cocked her head, and Dyys coughed, “Well, you’re not quite old enough for that story.”

Bel had been drawing water from the well, topless. She hadn’t cared about modesty then, because she hadn’t been attracted to Dyys, yet. However, the moment Dyys had seen her she had felt a hunger she hadn’t felt in hundreds of years. Then, almost instantly, she got to be the hero, to sweep in and save Bel from the bandits.

Well, she’d almost screwed that over. She’d killed them, and left Bel to bury them. No comprehension that death meant something to humanity. Now, death meant something to everyone. Even her kind. She wondered how that had gone over in the Hall. Hero dead, and not coming back. All the playful throat slitting and back stabbing, only to find that they weren’t going to come back from the edge, because magic was infected.

“I loved her.” Dyys struggled to get the words out, “She was... Strong. Stronger than any human I have ever met. Stronger than Trei. Stronger than Ashwen or Selene or Talin. They all look... Weak, next to her. Even though she was human.”

Akheron’s jaw dropped, which on a Fury with an unhinging jaw was quite a sight. He really couldn’t imagine someone that strong, not a human. They just looked like lunch to him, because most of them were. If he hunted them, they’d die. No chance to stop him.

Dyys smiled weakly, “She was my master.”

She didn’t get further than that, as the tears ran down her cheeks silently. Astarte snuggled into her, crying quietly into her chest, and pulling like she wanted to be back inside her.

Akheron shot to her side, under her legs and curled up with his head on her stomach. He wasn’t going to miss out on this. Dyys smiled, “Come on, you too.”

He moved up her slowly, eyeing his sister, waiting for her to lash out. Dyys grabbed him and pulled him up, holding the both of them. Holding her children.

Dyys

Astarte pounced on her chest, claws digging into some overly sensitive parts. Dyys yelped, and looked at her daughter, “Well, I’m awake. What is it?”

“Muk’da.” The little girl growled, her red eyes shining in the dark of the garden. Dyys looked over, and saw her son curled around himself, chewing his tail anxiously, but listening.

Dyys smiled, “Her name was Bel.”

Both sets of eyes instantly popped into giant saucers, completely enraptured by the thought of their other mother. Their auras went blank. They weren’t thinking, they were hanging on her every word.

“She was a farmhand.” She said slowly, remembering the first time she’d met her, “She tried to save the soil, even after it was dead. After the calamity hit. She was a tough one. Stubborn. Stronger than she looked. She was born without a voice. She used her hands.”

Astarte moved in closer as her brother dropped his tail from his mouth. Even the violent little hairs on their heads seemed to have quietened. To hear about their mother.

“She had brown hair, cut short. Practical. Deep blue eyes that always seemed to be telling me I was being an idiot. That telling her to go was a waste of breath.” Dyys grinned, remembering Bel refusing to leave in the dwergaz mine, “I fell for her, from almost the moment we met.”

Astarte cocked her head, and Dyys coughed, “Well, you’re not quite old enough for that story.”

Bel had been drawing water from the well, topless. She hadn’t cared about modesty then, because she hadn’t been attracted to Dyys, yet. However, the moment Dyys had seen her she had felt a hunger she hadn’t felt in hundreds of years. Then, almost instantly, she got to be the hero, to sweep in and save Bel from the bandits.

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Trei

Uncanny had turned dangerous. Their room was exactly the way he'd left it. Which didn't make any sense. Summer had stayed and lived here, when he'd gone off to deal with the treaty. Summer was not a neat person. She hated getting up in the mornings, and had lived with a servant for most of the generations she'd been alive.

This meant the room hadn't been revived. Someone had plucked it from memory. His memory. It wasn't the kids. They'd restored the garden, but someone else had restored the realm and the house. This was a taunt. A message from Ausosa to come find her.

She was flaunting what he'd lost.

He was her one outstanding task, but he couldn't afford to get sidetracked. Today, he was taking Ashwen and Talin back home. To a place they could call home, where they could be free of all of this. Where they could outlive the chaos.

Even if the humans slaughtered each other, they wouldn't take Namatay. Because it would take the entire continent building an army together to even threaten two Fae, let alone him. Talin might be a terrified little boy, but he was still strong enough to hold his own. Ashwen on the other hand was a complete sociopath, capable of doing whatever it took to survive.

It was difficult to attack a city. Harder to take it. Thousands would die before Trei would consider giving up his family. He had been a king once. Now he was all that they had left.

"Eugh. It is not a threat, Trei. Sheesh."

He turned around slowly, spreading his hands as he saw her. Finally saw the woman who had killed his daughter to get at power. Killed his wife for revenge for something that happened thousands of years ago.

She tucked a strand of hair behind one ear, mirroring her sister, "Please, I'm not in the mood to fight. This was supposed to be an offer, idiot."

Trei frowned, "An offer of what? More memories than can hurt? More people you'll kill if I don't let you rip my heart out?"

"You don't have to die!" Ausosa shouted, glaring at him. "Nobody else has to die. That's the point. I was the one with the lifestream, Trei. This is what you want. Summer. Faith. You want them back. I can give you them back, because I saved them."

Trei stared at her, "What?"

Ausosa sighed, "I know what I did. I know it was wrong, but it was the only way I could make it happen. That doesn't mean I'm a heartless bitch. I didn't want my sister dead. I couldn't save everyone, there's a fucking balance I hate about this. But I saved those I could. If you don't hunt me, I bring them back."

Trei laughed in surprise, "Hunt you? I was walking away, Ausosa. Ashwen, Talin. They were all I had left. Why would I risk them to hurt you? Don't get me wrong, I fucking hate you down to my core. What I want is to tear you limb from limb and make you beg to die. But I won't do that."

Ausosa smiled slowly, "Then... Take them. Take them home with you. To wherever the hell you're hiding. I'll show you where they are."

Trei glared at her, "Summer on the other hand, will gut you like a fish. You made her watch, Ausosa. You didn't just kill Faith."

“No.” Ausosa winced, “I sacrificed her. I need the grief of Sumner. Because it was Summer who locked him in.”

“Pheter.” Trei winced, “This is all just a breakout?”

“I’m not about to tell you.” The Fae rolled her eyes. “I’m not stupid enough to mistake you for a friend, Trei. You were designed to end the gods. You will end me, given half a chance. The less I deal with you, the better. Do you want Summer and Faith back or not?”

“I won’t hunt you.” Trei replied, “Now give me back my family, bitch.”

Antoinette

Alteo was chatty for a woman whose beliefs about her visions changed and controlled an empire. An empire that was doing disturbingly well compared to absolutely everyone else.

Antoinette waved at one of the windows as they passed, “Are you growing out there? How? Did you heal it? The soil. I’ve been trying, but we were barely getting anywhere.”

“No.” Alteo shook her head, “Curing the Fel is beyond us. The Sibyl saw the calamity coming. Half our population is elfin. We shielded the entirety of this nation. Not one rock made it to the ground. It was close, the barrier nearly broke, but there were thirty thousand casters. We survived, for now. The Fel is creeping in at our borders.”

Antoinette’s mind raced at the idea. So many magic users in one place, with one purpose. That might be power equivalent to a god. Mishia was a terrifying place. Any army that came here was begging to die. No wonder the borders were always closed.

“We’re not just elfin and human.” Alteo shrugged, “We have some orks, runaways from Drak’tur, mainly. A few have been to Ozandius, to be cured by Kru. We also have goblins, and trolls. There’s even a dwergaz and wyrm who arrived recently.”

Antoinette’s jaw dropped, “Nidoghr is here? Holy crap.”

Alteo blinked in surprise, “You know a wyrm by name? When did that happen? We can’t see them. The Sibyl. His race is shielded from the gaze of the celestial.”

“Nidoghr saved my life.” Antoinette smiled, “That pacifist dragon broke me out of prison after King Iza decided to try and make me into a pawn between him and Yurk. At the request of Shannon. Who I am certain he freaking hates, now.”

“The calamity took a toll.” Alteo nodded, “He spends most of his days in meditation, trying to come to terms with the end of the world. An end he helped bring about by saving the High Priestess.”

Antoinette looked down, “I guess he wouldn’t want to see me then.”

“I will ask.” Alteo smiled, “I can be diplomatic. I know it doesn’t seem it at times. Some of our responses to your letters have been... Unkind. I let the act drop around those I think would prefer it not exist. But I know diplomacy.”

She rolled her eyes, “A few hundred year old elf? Of course you can be nice.”

Alteo laughed, “And you can be insensitive. Age isn’t something elfin discuss. It is incredibly rude. Not just on the level of a decent slap, like a human boy asking a girl her age. More like getting his balls cut off. Just a warning.”

Antoinette winced, “I like my lady parts. So how deep into this palace is this shrine?”

“It isn’t. It’s at Soldiers Ring. We’re going to a... Linked place. Soldiers is across the entire city, outside the wall. I don’t feel like walking for four hours.” Alteo shrugged, “We have a few of them through the city. It’s a bit rough, but it works.”

Antoinette glared at her, “Gateways?”

“Gateways are ancient.” Alteo laughed, “We’ve moved on since then.”

She whirled in front of the elf, “You built the Gateways?”

“My grand grandmother was the Second Sibyl when they were built.” Alteo nodded, stepping

passed her, “Mishia ruled half the continent back then. Danren, Balavid, Ozandius, Yurk, Solas. They were all a part of Mishia. Hells, the Giwonsangukian Empire was Falenthia then. it was a different world.”

Antoinette sighed, “One nation, many races. Mishia is a myth to most of this world. They need to know about it, First Sibyl.”

“Alteo will do.” The woman shrugged, ears twitching, “I can understand why you think it, but no good has ever come from sharing our technology and magic. There was a persistent witch who came here, once. She learned a lot from us. Her name was Vastras, and she used it to build a man to kill the gods.”

“I know who Vastras was.” Antoinette snapped, “Calis was inside Ozandian borders. I’ve met Summer and Trei. I got along with them.”

Alteo nodded slowly, “I honestly hope I never meet Trei. I am horrified by his very existence. A manufactured god? He exists to kill us. All of us. Without the gods, there is very little hope of a future timeline.”

“He is more than he was created to be.” Antoinette glared, “Now you’re being rude. He’s not just a tool. If he was, Vastras would still be alive. So would Tyr. And Drak’tur. And every other idiot who has tried to wreck the worlds in recent days.”

Alteo nodded slowly, “Then why is Ausosa? She killed his child. Sacrificed her.”

Antoinette rolled her eyes, “He’s still a king. Unless all the Fae are dead, he has other responsibilities. And grieving. The moment he snaps, I promise you, you will feel pity for Ausosa.”

Alteo nodded slowly, “I . . . Believe you. Or rather, I just saw what you described. I don’t want to see him angry again. Those are always scary visions.”

The ground shook violently, and Antoinette looked up in surprise. The First Sibyl just waved a hand, “Zanfir is invading. We knew it was coming. It is more important that I get you to where you need to be.”

Which apparently, was almost there. The Sibyl opened a door, revealing a series of stone platforms, inlaid with storm stones and sigils she didn’t recognise in the least. They were complex, and full of sharp angles.

Alteo waved a hand, “Step into the centre of the platform, please. I will come after you, as soon as I can. Don’t die before I get there.”

Antoinette stepped up nervously, swallowing. Alteo muttered something and snapped her fingers.

She gasped as she found herself on her knees, on a stone platform. The air smelled burned, and her ears were assaulted with a cacophony of explosions. She flung herself to the side as a shard of ice nearly skewered her.

She stood up, waving her hands frantically, weaving a golden barrier as spells began to hammer against it. Each barrier was broken nearly as quickly as she could form it in place.

She could see the mages standing across from her. A dozen mages. She did not have a chance against power like this.

Shannon touched her shoulder, “Alteo will take care of them. Just stay alive.”

Easier said than done.

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Shannon touched her shoulder, “Alteo will take care of them. Just stay alive.”

Easier said than done.



Aurili

Lilibeth smiled at her, and then grabbed her and hugged her, “Screw it. You’re never going to be the one to say it first, are you? I missed you. I . . . You were the only thing I was thinking about when I . . . I fell.”

Aurili shook her head, “No. Stop it. Please.”

Lilibeth turned away from her, kicking the ground in frustration, and made Aurili want to kick herself. “Not like that. I need to say something, Lilibeth. Me. It doesn’t have to be you. I . . . I have had opportunities to say this, and I threw them all away. It’s all I’ve been thinking about since I lost you.”

Lilibeth paused, looking down at the ground. Aurili ground her teeth and walked over, grabbing her hand and stepping in front of her, “I’m an idiot, Lilibeth. When Wrodin saved me, he told me I would live to regret my choice, but I just didn’t know what else to give him. I was a stupid and young girl. I’m not anymore, I’m a woman. My god is dead, and I was released from my vow, and I still played hard to get. I’m an idiot. Through and through. Madder than Carmichael. Stupider than the prince.”

Lilibeth’s jaw tightened, “You’re not wrong.”

Aurili winced, “Ow. I’m trying, here. I’m sorry. For everything. I love you, Lilibeth.”

Lilibeth burst into tears instantly, “Oh shit. I really wish you hadn’t said that.”

Aurili stared, not understanding, and Lilibeth nodded her head gently to the side. She turned and saw someone standing there who wasn’t before. A woman with black and red hair handing down to her waist. A woman with black wings. A woman with one eye of blue, and one eye of silver.

“Ausosa.”

The Fae smiled, skipping up to them, “Well. This isn’t quite when I was imagining the reconciliation. In fact, I was rather hoping Zanfir would kill you, Aurili. You are a persistent thorn in my side. Which is why I resurrected Lilibeth.”

Aurili clenched her jaw, reaching for her hip, where there was no sword. She’d been in a prison cell. She didn’t have any weapons. Not to mention she didn’t know if weapons would even work in a place like this.

Ausosa laughed, “I’m offering you something. If you stay out of my way, I’ll give Lilibeth back to you. I’ll drop the two of you back into your world, anywhere you want. So long as you stay the fuck out of my way.”

Lilibeth sighed, “You can’t.”

Aurili felt frightened tears running down her cheeks as she realised what it meant. As she understood why the Sibyl had brought her here. She’d been given a second chance, to say goodbye. If she didn’t stand and fight Ausosa, then they were all doomed. Lilibeth would never forgive her if she chose her over the ’verse.

She wanted her to do what she’d always done. Live by her vow, protecting the world, and denying herself any chance at what she actually wanted. Except she’d lost that chance already. She’d lost it all, and she hadn’t stayed to fight for the ’verse. She’d given up.

She didn’t want to be a servant of war anymore. She wanted Lilibeth, her and nothing else.

She grabbed Lilibeth, kissing her as she cried. The soldier didn’t kiss her back. She fell forward,

her head hitting her chest, “Please... Don’t do this... Lilibeth... Please...”

“Soldier. Your mission is not yet complete.” Lilibeth growled, her voice cracking by the end of it. Aurili stood up, glaring at the woman she loved, “You really make things hard, don’t you? Our first kiss and you can’t even give me a moment before reminding me what I should be doing?”

Lilibeth looked down with embarrassment, “Well, I wouldn’t say it was our first kiss. Maybe the first you remember.”

Aurili flushed, “What?”

“You’re a terrible drunk.” Lilibeth laughed, punching her arm, “And as a prophet of Meria’el, I didn’t drink.”

Aurili stamped a foot, “Why is this the first I’m hearing about this?”

“Because I’m distracting you.” Lilibeth smiled innocently. “And Ausosa, too.”

Before she could ask what from a strong hand grabbed her from behind, and she found herself crashing down into a burning city.

She launched to her feet and a sword sailed through the air. She caught it, watching as the elf slipped off the back of the hellhound in front of her. “Garmr. Go play.”

The wolf howled and plowed through the ranks of soldiers in front of them. Blood and steel tore as lightning arced through the air. The elf caught the lightning, spinning it into a ball in her hand before tossing it into the soldiers.

“Sorry, Aurili.” Alfar stated tightly, “We need you.”

The soldier shook her head, readying her stance, “Oh, fuck you. And fuck Ausosa. And fuck Lilibeth for being so damn committed to always doing the right thing.”

The elf hissed, her ears flattening as the army began to advance again, “Yeah, fuck the bitch.”

Aurili

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Alfar

Soldiering was hard work. She knew where every attack would come from. How to guide the magical currents to cause the spells to rebound, but there were only two of them against the thousands of soldiers spilling into the streets.

Zanfir had already breached the outer wall, pushing back the lines of defence to Trade Town and South Road. Most of the city was lost. Elfin blood ran through the streets, mingling with human, troll and ork. The smell was suffocating her. If she didn't already remember this, she would be on her knees, gagging, unable to fight.

She didn't know how the soldier behind her was ignoring it. She didn't have the same experience that Alfar had to be able to cope. Yet she did have the anger of losing Lilibeth for a second time.

Alfar punched through the steel armour of a soldier easily, ripping his heart back out and tossing it behind her. She heard Garmr wolf it down as he shot by. This wasn't play for her, though it was for him. This was the purpose the hellhound was created for.

He was an anti-personnel weapon, created to be deployed against armies. She had hoped she'd rescued him from that when he found her. Hoped despite knowing it wasn't the truth.

Alfar caught the sword in her teeth, shattering it and headbutting the soldier backwards as she grabbed his storm stone. She broke the gemstone in her hand, causing the raw magic contained inside to explode out from her palm and back into the advancing forces.

There were too many streets, too many avenues. It didn't matter how many the blocked off, it was just Aurili, her and Garmr defending the whole of Trade Town. They were surrounded in every direction, and the enemy was merciless. They would sacrifice a thousand soldiers if it meant removing the threat the two of them posed.

They needed an edge here, yet Alfar knew there wasn't one. She remembered how this battle ended. Lying there in chains, weeping as she watched Aurili get executed. That future might be averted, but it was so difficult. They were so close to a fixed event now. Any moment, and that future would be forced into being.

The only hope lay at Soldiers Ring, north of the city, where Antoinette fought for her life, assisted by the bitch. There only hope was that the bitch still needed Antoinette alive to do what she wanted to do.

Alfar shook her head sadly, and put her hands up, summoning what strength she had from the now, the past and the next. She combined forces with herself and her memories of herself, and channelled all that magic into one more spell.

The golden barrier of Sarin snapped into reality once more, surrounding the square.

She fell forwards onto her face, feeling the blood pouring out of her ears. She had done too much, like she remembered she would. She smiled slowly. The bitch could rant and rave all she wanted.

Alfar would defeat her, in the end.

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Dyys

She didn't get a chance to react as the hellhound slammed into her. A hellhound with a rider. She hadn't seen a hellhound ever allow someone to ride them. That someone had both be insane enough to try, and lucky enough to succeed, was insanity. They were incredible weapons, not pets.

The creature grabbed her, and then let go of her as they passed through a dimensional wall. She hit the ground rolling, screaming as her stomach barely brushed the tiles.

She dragged herself upright, glaring to the doorway, where she saw Selene struggling to hold back a torrent of lightning magic. She hissed, her hair igniting to life and she stood up, "Hekate. Move."

Selene leapt to the side as Dyys scorched the soldiers out of the world. She coughed, wincing as she felt the Fel digging its claws deeper into her soul.

"Muk'to?" A voice asked as Astarte landed on her shoulder. She smiled at her daughter, "We don't like them."

"Ex'pa!" She heard an excited roar as Akheron charged out of the room. A moment she heard the explosion he had been crowing over.

Selene smiled over at her, but there was no light in her eyes. Humanity still held sway in the woman. "It is good to have you back, Dyys."

She shrugged, "The hell is going on?"

"Invasion forces from Zanzir." Selene replied, waving a hand towards a window, "They warped in, Dyys. Someone has taught them mass transportation magic. This city doesn't stand a chance."

"Didn't." Dyys corrected her with a grin, "What use are three Furies and a Hekate if we can't destroy a simple human army?"

Akheron slithered unsteadily back in, his hair complaining and blowing on the burns. He grinned up at her, "Ex'pa."

"To the roof." Dyys grinned, "Let us show these idiotic mortals what power really is. That their lightning magic doesn't even begin to compare."

Selene eyes flashed gold for a moment, getting excited.

Unfortunately, the trip up towards the roof wasn't quite as inspiring. Dyys was still struggling to move, still feeling the scars forming internally. If she moved too quickly she'd pop her stitches, and she had a feeling that Trei wouldn't be coming back to help.

Whoever had sent her back though, she was grateful too. As much as she hated to admit it, and hated the woman, she still cared for Selene. She pitied the woman as much as she blamed her for her child's death.

She didn't know if she wanted her as a sister, or wanted to execute her. Either way, the only one permitted to harm the Hekate was herself. Nobody else had a right to touch her.

Astarte showed herself every bit as violent as her brother. Whilst he enjoyed flashy magic, especially explosions, she enjoyed making the people who annoyed her suffer. She dove down the throats of soldiers, dragging their entrails out as she burst out of their bellies with handfuls of things that should remain inside.

The young girl revelled in the violence. This was a Fury thing. They'd been designed to cause chaos like this to attacking forces. Dyys remembered the joy she'd felt the first time she'd made a

mortal scream in pain. It was a phase, it would pass.

Until then, her children were far more dangerous to the enemy than she was. She would show them mercy with a quick death. Her children did not yet know what mercy was, or why they should care.

Selene put an arm around her, steadying her as she followed the blood trails up the stairs towards the roof. "Are you worried about them?"

"Always." Dyys replied with a touch more anger than she should have.

The Hekate went silent. Dyys sighed heavily, "Yes, I am angry at you. I don't know what I'll do about it yet. For now, ignore it. Please."

"As you wish." Selene whispered, and pushed her to the side as just the torso of a body came tumbling down the stairs. "Are you concerned they'll get hurt?"

"Getting hurt is a part of life." Dyys replied, "It is necessary to grow. If you fight, you get hurt. But hurt badly? That's unlikely. If a mortal managed to hurt one of them, I would pity him."

Selene smiled, "The twins are protective of each other."

"Absolutely." Dyys nodded, "And so far they aren't even using the Fury. This is just a game to them. If either was in real danger, I'd expect someone might get their soul yanked out of them."

Selene shivered, "I don't think I find that very comforting."

Dyys laughed, wincing, "Probably not. I will have to take them home at some point. Without a place to call our own, they will eventually endanger this world. Humans are too weak, and too plentiful. My children are not weak. Even by Fury standards they are... Astonishing. I'm proud."

They emerged into the cold air, surrounded by the haze of smoke from fires burning throughout the city. Dyys walked over to the wall, and leaned on it, glaring out at the city. "We'll coordinate from here. Selene, I need you to slow their advance through the Port. They've reached the halfway point, you can funnel them into two streets, from there."

The Hekate nodded and jumped over the wall with a grin.

Dyys turned her gaze, "Astarte. I need you to protect the wall around the fortress. The drawbridge has been broken, forcing it open."

The young girl pouted, walking over to the edge with a flick of her hair. A moment later hellfire screamed out of the sky, sealing the gap as it tore soldiers and their souls apart.

"Akheron. Drive them out of the city. Be forceful about it."

He grinned at her, "Ex'pa?"

"As long as you leave the city and our people intact." Dyys instructed carefully. She wasn't sure how much control he had over his explosion magic yet, but judging from the way he always seemed to get burned, not a lot. He would do some damage to Be Liphu.

He would do more damage to the idiots who thought they could take her city from her.

Akheron launched over the edge, and Dyys smiled slowly as she saw that his scales were beginning to peel. He was beginning to transform. She'd have to take him to a tailor tomorrow. Getting him to wear clothes would be a fun battle.

"Astarte." Dyys snapped, her eyes spotting something. Her daughter hissed at her, "Dan fa, Muk'to!"

A group of soldiers had climbed the wall, using hooks shot by arrow fire. They didn't survive as her daughter converted the ropes carrying their weight to dust.

Dyys turned her gaze, and shouted out to a particular mind, "Selene, they've climbed the warehouse. They're right above you."

The Hekate vanished for a moment, reappearing carving through the soldiers who thought they could make their way around her.

"Lady Dyys." She turned and smiled, "Lord Mayor. It seems Zanzfir wants to invade your precious city. Don't worry, they won't succeed."

"I'm evacuating the city." The mayor replied, "I came to warn you, personally."

"No, you're not." Dyys instructed, "Your guards are going to help me keep the city intact. If they don't, I'll eat your fucking heart. Grow a spine or I'll rip it out through your back."

The man jerked in terror, looking at her brilliant red eyes, and she felt the madness beginning to settle in his mind. The terror that humans felt when they saw a Fury with their magic unleashed.

She quietened her hair, turning it into a silky mess, releasing him. "Get a move on. Call your soldiers back. I need them in the Port, assisting Selene, and at Greywall."

She hoped it was called Greywall. She hadn't looked at the map for that long. Only long enough to confirm where she thought her people had lived in the past. The Valleys.

A roar of laughter echoed from the city, as a moment later hundreds of soldiers launched into the air. The explosion rocked the fortress, cracking the air with a boom that made her ears ring.

Dyys laughed slowly, "Akheron is enjoying himself. Is there something you want to do, Astarte?"

The Fury looked at her mother and shrugged, "Mek'ta'vo."

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Trei

He'd known the slap was coming, before he even began to materialise in the house in Namatay. He'd planned to stand there, and let her hit him until the anger faded away. However, he'd forgotten just how strong she was.

His face slammed through the table and into the ground, breaking the stone beneath the rug.

He held up his hands as he rolled over, "Summer! Wait!"

"Why the voiden motherfuck should I!?" She shouted at him, her blue eyes blazing with an anger he'd not quite missed as much as the rest of her.

Trei winced, "I know I'm an idiot. But... Can't I have you back first? Before we do this?"

Summer dropped her fists, "Stupid idiot."

He stood up slowly, waiting for her to change her mind and stepped towards her hesitantly. Summer glared, "Hug me. Now."

He grabbed her, burying his head in her shoulder as he felt her arms go around him gently. Her smell surrounded him, and he started to cry. He had her back. He'd lost her, forever.

He felt Summer's tears on his shoulder, and heard her speak with a quiet growl, "If you ever do something this stupid again, I'm leaving you."

His heart felt like it had been stabbed. He pulled back to look at her in fear, and Summer shook her head, "We will talk about this. Idiot. For now, shut up. Not one word."

Trei nodded, and Summer kissed him. He felt her shaking as she did, like she wasn't sure if he was there or not. He held her tight, savouring every part of her. Letting her know that he loved her.

"Ew."

They broke the kiss with an embarrassed smile, and Trei turned, crouching, "Faith."

The Faeling raised an eyebrow at him, "I'm mad at you."

Summer stamped her foot, "Faith. He brought you back from the dead. At least give him a hug. Leave cutting his balls to me."

"Ew. Mum!" Faith shouted, "Do you have to say it like that? Ew! I'm going to my room."

Summer sighed, "Sorry."

Trei stood up, shaking, and looked at her, "You're here. That's enough for me."

A fist caught him in the gut and he crashed through the couch with an explosion of wood and fluff. "It shouldn't be, you idiot. You agreed not to attack Ausosa! My voiden sister who killed me, and used your daughter in a twisted ritual!"

Trei coughed weakly, "I had to... Get you back."

Summer dragged him to his feet, "I'm sorry I didn't tell you about Ausosa. But now we can't fight her, and she's about to release Pheter, and us being alive won't matter anymore because we'll die."

Trei frowned, "How so?"

"I imprisoned Pheter the only way I could." Summer winced, "He didn't just kill Tyr. He linked with him. So when Tyr became immortal and outside time, Pheter became immortal and

inside it. He was more powerful than Kao'el, and completely batshit insane. I imprisoned Pheter inside the lifestream."

Trei's face fell, "Oh shit. That's why she corrupted it."

"So Pheter could absorb it." Summer said carefully, biting off each angry word, "Pheter is about to become everything that was the gods. All their power, every single speck of it, is about to be his. Ausosa thinks she can bring his mind back. She always did. But if he's absorbing that much of the Fel, he won't have a mind for her to even try to rescue."

Trei winced, "You have to have some sort of failsafe for this. I know you. You will have planned for something like this."

"Didn't expect you to be the idiot involved." Summer twitched, and breathed out heavily, "But now you mention it, yes. There is a failsafe. One in every realm. A shrine, guarded by a specially trained warrior. The shine at Eldrasa was Yggdrasil. Kru killed that with the Fel. There was a shrine at Calis, a crystal that Vastras used and Azrael destroyed."

Trei turned his gaze slowly, "There's only one shrine left, Summer. Someone has been destroying them. The manmade, and the originals. There's only one that you made left."

"Shahr." Summer winced, "Protected. Alis and I made it, together. Only a half-elf can get at it. It should be safe."

"Antoinette is there." Trei replied with irritation.

"Void."

Trei turned back, "There's nothing we can do. Damn it."

Summer slapped him again, but there was no strength behind it. He put his arms around her, holding her gently. "I'm sorry."

"I didn't tell you." Summer replied, "You weren't to know. I didn't want to tell you that the person who resurrected the sociopath that nearly destroyed both of us was my sister. Didn't want to tell you that she was worse than he ever was."

Trei smiled, putting his head on hers, "I can understand. You condemned your sister to hell for eternity. That's a hard topic to bring up."

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Antoinette

The mages were blown away as Alteo appeared on the platform, surrounded by black flames. The Sibyl ran over to her, wincing as she saw the burned leg and rags of her clothes.

Antoinette stood up, limping, “I’m fine. Where is the shrine?”

Alteo spun to block another arc of magic, “Stand in the centre of the Rising.”

Soldiers Rising was made up of a haphazard collection of stones, falling into the soil. It looked almost like tendrils of a hand, reach up and out of the ground.

Antoinette limped into position, blocking an arrow with a quick circle of magic, “Now what?”

Alteo screamed angrily, black fire rising out of the earth in every single direction, driving the army back momentarily. She fell to one knee, “Open the Gateway. Say the words.”

“What words?” Antoinette demanded, and then felt Shannon lean on her back, “The words, idiot. The ones written on the stones?”

She looked around desperately, knowing they were running out of time, “I don’t... I can’t read them. They’re too old. They’ve faded.”

“Soldier... Rising...” Shannon said slowly, as if it were obvious.

Antoinette clenched her fists, as she felt the mana surge, “Neros bhewmi pora!”

The ground instantly began to shake, as the towers of stone around her began to move, circling her. Light shot between them. This was a Gateway, one of a kind she’d never seen or heard about.

Shannon began to laugh behind her, but it wasn’t her laugh. It was...

Antoinette tried to run forward, cursing. It was too late. The Gateway had her.

Antoinette

The mages were blown away as Alteo appeared on the platform, surrounded by black flames. The Sibyl ran over to her, wincing as she saw the burned leg and rags of her clothes.

Antoinette stood up, limping, “I’m fine. Where is the shrine?”

Alteo spun to block another arc of magic, “Stand in the center of the Rising.”

Soldiers Rising was made up of a haphazard collection of stones, falling into the soil. It looked almost like tendrils of a hand, reach up and out of the ground.

Antoinette limped into position, blocking an arrow with a quick circle of magic, “Now what?”

Alteo screamed angrily, black fire rising out of the earth in every single direction, driving the army back momentarily. She fell to one knee, “Open the Gateway. Say the words.”

“What words?” Antoinette demanded, and then felt Shannon lean on her back, “The words, idiot. The ones written on the stones?”

She looked around desperately, knowing they were running out of time, “I don’t... I can’t read them. They’re too old. They’ve faded.”

“Soldier... Rising...” Shannon said slowly, as if it were obvious.

Antoinette clenched her fists, as she felt the mana surge, “Neros bhewmi pora!”

The ground instantly began to shake, as the towers of stone around her began to move, circling her. Light shot between them. This was a Gateway, one of a kind she’d never seen or heard about.

Shannon began to laugh behind her, but it wasn’t her laugh. It was...

Antoinette tried to run forward, cursing. It was too late. The Gateway had her.

Aurili

She traced her sword against the edge of the barrier, holding up her sword with disappointment as she saw where the edge had dissolved. Nothing could get at them, and they couldn't get out.

She wandered back over to the fallen elf. She was a strange one. She was also sick, whatever she'd done to summon the barrier had effected her. She was bleeding out of every orifice, and a thick black substance was leaking out of her mouth.

Attempts to stop any of that, or wake her, had been unsuccessful.

She looked with worry to one side of the barrier. Where one enemy hadn't stopped trying to force its way inside. It wasn't an enemy. It was a very worried hellhound. Garmr was beating his head against it, causing parts of him to melt and vanish, yet he kept going.

He would have been inside already if dimensional shifting were possible inside this cube of golden light.

Aurili should have felt calmer in here. Accepting of the animal's sacrifice, but calm that she was no longer being attacked from every angle by both magic and weapons, but she wasn't.

She felt more anxious than she'd ever felt before. Ausosa was using them, somehow. This army. Attacking Shahr was part of her plan, somehow. It didn't make sense. What did they have that a Fae who could blitz through gods want?

Did she want to protect the shrine? Or did she want Aurili and Antoinette dead?

Why attack the city when she was willing to offer them both exactly what they wanted. The thing that they were missing all this time. The hole in their hearts. Aurili hadn't been given much of a choice by Lilibeth.

Shannon might have done the same to Antoinette, but she had a feeling that Antoinette would have accepted her anger and given up the fight anyway. Just to be with her again.

Alfar groaned, rolling over, "Garmr, play dead."

Aurili launched backwards, rolling as an enormous wall of metal slammed into the ground where she had been standing. She glared at the hellhound, "That was on purpose, wasn't it?"

He eyed her innocently.

Alfar sighed, "Garmr."

The dog rolled over and stood over her, and licked, then pulled back and whimpered. The Sibyl sat up, touching her ears gently, "That was what I was afraid of."

Aurili frowned, "What is it?"

"He doesn't like how the Fel tastes." Alfar replied, "I taste like Fel. Magic is bad. Infected. Garmr doesn't like it. I don't either."

The soldier nodded, walking over and sitting, "You don't look in great shape."

"I do tomorrow." Alfar shrugged, "Unless this is that world. I don't think it is. I remember it being like this. I remember Lilibeth smiling."

Aurili winced, "I'm never going to get her back. Ausosa will use her as a hostage. I can't... Do that to her. She'll die again."

Alfar rolled her eyes, "That's yesterday. Today is new. The bitch isn't worried. She thinks she's winning. She doesn't know she already lost."

She smiled slowly, "Can you let me in on the secret? How do we save the city?"

"We don't." Alfar replied, "Alteo is dead. I remember it, torn apart saving Antoinette. But you're not. Ausosa was so busy watching the pseualf she forgot about the warrior. When I die, you survive."

Aurili winced, "Don't say things like that. I need you."

"No, you don't." Alfar replied, using her hellhound to pull herself upright, "What you need is a Fae. An angry Fae who just wants a fight. Who misses the man she loved, a total trashbag who she's still angry with for lying to her. Lying for generations."

"Who is it?"

"Duh." Alfar said, crossing her eyes to mock her, "Ashwen. Any other Fae with an army hidden under a rock? Go ahead. Call her."

Aurili shrugged, "Yeah. How the hells do I do that? I'm human. Not a mage, not an elf."

"You're a godlike." Alfar said angrily, glaring at her, "Speak with your god voice."

She shook her head, she didn't understand. She knew she had been connected to Wrodin, as his champion, but she didn't see how that would help her attract anyone's attention.

Alfar smiled at her and then slapped her.

Aurili shook her head, "What the hell?"

Except she wasn't standing where she had been standing. It hadn't just been a slap. She was standing back in that place from before. The walls of nowhere, and ground of white.

Standing over a body, bleeding out.

Not again. No.

Aurili fell to her knees, grabbing Lilibeth's hand and squeezing it, "Stay with me. Please."

The pink eyes fluttered, flashing between a brown and pink, "Oh. You're here."

She pushed a hand against the gash on Lilibeth's stomach, knowing that without magic the woman was already dead. "Please. Don't do this..."

"Eh." Lilibeth replied, "Has... To... Happen... Sometime..."

"No!" Aurili shouted, and put her forehead against hers, "I'm ordering you to stay alive, praetor. I am not losing you."

Lilibeth smiled weakly, "Didn't... You... Resign?"

Aurili felt tears running down her cheeks, "Please. Lili."

"Ha." Lilibeth said weakly, "I knew you... Had a pet name. For me."

"Lili..." Aurili wept. She didn't have words for losing her. Not so soon after finding her again.

Alfar appeared nearby, leaning on her hellhound, "Say the words! Use the godvoice already! Save her!"

Aurili squeezed her hand as she felt Lilibeth slipping away, "I don't understand. I don't know how to..."

Lilibeth reached up, pulling her down to whisper in her ear, "Tell... The gods... To... Get... Fucked..."

Aurili blinked in surprise, and Lilibeth collapsed.

She felt as if her heart stopped as she fell. Felt as if the whole world had stopped. Like something inside her had snapped.

She stood up slowly, twitching, as she felt her eyes burning. Not just from tears. Burning from the inside, like something was fighting and screaming to get out.

“No.” She stated angrily. It wasn’t fair that Lilibeth had to die. She wasn’t going to accept it. She was going to find Ausosa, and rip her heart out. She didn’t care if she was just a mortal, she wasn’t going to let it happen.

The ground beneath her cracked, she stepped back in surprise. It wasn’t just the ground. The entire space had cracked like something had hit it. The walls, and floor, looked like a giant had punched them.

“No!” Aurili shouted, pouring the full strength of her emotion into it. It wasn’t just a shout, it was a commandment.

The room shattered instantly, and she found herself tumbling in nothingness, alone. She clenched her fists, demanding that she stop moving, and she did. She stood there, alone in the nothingness.

Aurili fell to her knees and cried.

She’d lost her. Again.

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She’d lost her. Again.

Alfar

She smiled as she stood across the room, looking at the red and silver haired witch. The Fae who had started all of this so very long ago and tomorrow. Across every timeline she had won, over and over again.

Until one day she'd decided to curse a hundred year old elf.

Ausosa glared at her, "You. Again. Why can't you stay out of the way? I never target you. I never attack you. Why do you hound my footsteps?"

Alfar rolled her eyes, "You cursed me, bitch. Do you think that is forgivable? You cursed me, in every timeline, in every world that was."

"I left you alive." Ausosa muttered, "I couldn't have you seeing me."

"I see everything!" Alfar snapped, "Why is that the hardest thing for you all to understand? I see it. All of it. I saw you do this to me before you did. I saw myself cursed at my first breath. I saw you die before I was born. I see everything. You didn't hide yourself but breaking my control. You made me angry."

The Fae winced, "I didn't know."

"You never know!" Alfar spat, "You never know that Tyr is a goddamn asswipe who deserves everything that happens to him. You always love him, and he always hits you. You always love Pheter, and he always destroys the 'verse. You always hate yourself, and you always kill your niece. Not knowing is not your excuse. I don't like you, because you are stupid!"

Ausosa sighed, "So now, I have to kill you. To keep you out of the way."

"No." Alfar shook her head, smiling, "Now I tell you that the Fel tastes bad."

"What?" The Fae asked in surprise as Garmr barrelled into her from behind. Ausosa spun, knocking the hellhound off his feet.

A knife entered her back, and Alfar smiled, "I stabbed you."

Ausosa's elbow snapped into her face, nearly breaking her neck as it propelled her backwards. She caught Garmr's fur as he ran passed, ran back through the worlds and behind the barrier safely.

She grinned to herself. That had been worth it, to hurt her.

Alfar

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Dyys

She leaned forward, her eyes flashing, “Astarte. Do you see the rider?”

“Muk’la. Ta’sa no vah. Coran?” Astarte replied with mild disinterest. She nodded, “I agree. I can’t let that idiot coward be the one to greet them. I guess we’re taking over the city. Can you hold your own up here? Contain, not destroy. Don’t want to piss off whoever is sending the messenger.”

Astarte wandered over to her mother, and shrugged as she looked over the edge at the city. “Mek’ta’vo.”

That wasn’t the most reassuring way she could have put it. Dyys nodded slowly and then leapt over the edge of the palace wall. She landed where the drawbridge had fallen with a crash. She carved a small single-person hole through the flaming tornado her daughter had placed there. Not large enough for the horse, but enough for the rider.

She heard the mayor behind her cough nervously. She glared back at him, “Go back inside, mortal. I will handle this.”

“They’re sending a messenger. I can negotiate a peaceful surrender. I am not entirely useless, demon.” The man insisted.

She twitched and walked over to him, glaring at him, eye-to-eye, “I am not a demon, mortal. I am a Fury. I was created by Yio, not by the hands of a mad mage. Insult me again. Please. I would love it.”

The man winced, “I am still the best one suited to negotiate for my own city.”

“No.” Dyys smiled, “Because you’re talking surrender already. Three Furies and a Hekate are enough to hold the city indefinitely. A prolonged battle is the exact opposite of what an invading force wants. I conquered hell, mortal. I know what I’m talking about.”

The man sighed heavily, “Fuck. You’re seizing control, aren’t you?”

“No.” Dyys smiled, showing off her fangs, “I just want to be left alone. I will defend this city, and keep it intact. You are in control, unless you piss me off. How does that sound?”

He winced, “I don’t have a choice.”

“Glad we agree.” She turned back, “Go back inside. I’ll speak with the messenger. I might even let them live.”

She really did not want the responsibility of ruling a city. She didn’t want to deal with politics or economics. She didn’t want to worry about feeding mouths from tainted soil or dealing with plague outbreaks. She wanted none of that. What she wanted was a safe place for her family.

It didn’t take long for the messenger to arrive. Without her children trying to kill them, the road was mostly clear. The handful of soldiers that protected the city had mostly disappeared with the first attack on the Port.

They dismounted, walking through the path through the flames completely unfazed. This was a professional soldier, one who had seen real battle, and come out the other side scarred. When it came to a fight, they would do whatever it took to survive, they wouldn’t hesitate.

They’d lost a piece of their humanity.

Dyys smiled as sweetly as she could, keeping most of her attributes in check. To him, she might look like nothing more than a human with red eyes. Until he saw her teeth. Or noticed that the belt around her waist moved on its own.

The messenger saluted, "I speak for the goddess Ausosa."

Dyys' face fell, glaring at him as her eyes burned, "Oh, I wish you hadn't said that."

The messenger blinked in surprise, "The goddess... Your people know her?"

"She killed my master." Dyys said softly, "So, try and soften the blow. My hatred for her is more than you can possibly understand."

The messenger visibly flinched, "The goddess... Demands... Your surrender. I am sorry. There is no softening it. Unconditional surrender."

Dyys shrugged, "Ausosa can go dak'vi. Our defences our holding. Your troops are far from home. Ausosa may inspire, but unless she intervenes directly, I will hold this city. Indefinitely. Be Liphu is not important enough for that. So how many of you do I have to kill?"

The messenger flinched, "She won't like this."

"She'll like this less." She grinned, flashing her teeth. Understanding that she wasn't human flashed in his eyes as she continued, "I am the patron of this city. I am Dyys. She knows my name."

The messenger looked her up and down, "What are you, a demon?"

"Say it again and I'll rip the head from your body." Dyys snapped, eyes blazing, "I. Am not. A demon."

The messenger held up his hands, "Sorry. I... Don't know what you are."

"So you call me a skulking thing of hell?" She spat on the ground, "Though, I did live in hell for a few thousand years. A prisoner. All my people were. I spent the first five hundred years of life in Solas, before it existed. We are Furies. Created by Yio, to defend this world. When you call a Fury, demon, you call us the name of that which enslaved us. I think you can understand my problem with that."

He nodded slowly, "That I can. Yet... You said Ausosa killed your master."

She held up a hand quickly, "Not what you think. I was not her slave. I was hers. I gave myself to her."

The messenger winced, "Your bride. Our goddess, killed your bride."

Dyys nodded, "Yes. She also tried to kill me. Didn't quite succeed. But she'll know my name. Make sure you don't shout it. She might kill you."

The messenger shook his head, "So there's no way you will surrender?"

"Not unconditionally." Dyys smiled, "I will hold this city. That doesn't mean there isn't room for movement. But it will mean that Fae being flexible."

He nodded slowly, and turned and began walking back through the flames. She watched him go carefully. Not a single hesitation in his footsteps, despite what she'd told him, the way she'd surprised him. She liked him.

She closed the fire, and turned and walked inside. She looked at the mayor, standing there nervously, and smiled weakly, "Ausosa demands unconditional surrender. Probably to butcher you all."

The mayor winced, and Dyys smiled, "Calm. You have an army here. We're holding. Unless the goddess herself attacks, that situation isn't likely to change. You need to be focused on your people. Evacuate them to safe areas. Make sure we have food and water supplies, and any other

living in siege conditions crap I haven't thought of."

The mayor nodded slowly, "What is this going to be? Between you and me?"

"I'm your patron." Dyys shrugged, "I'll help you out, any time the city is in danger. In exchange, you let me go my way."

The man smiled slowly, "I thought you were Trei'el's champion. A champion of a new god."

"No." Dyys laughed, "No... Trei is more of a friend."

His humour evaporated as he tried to comprehend a person who was a friend to a god. Not just a god, the head of the new pantheon of gods. Gods who showed a willingness to break the rules, to walk among men and women like it was nothing.

The friend of a king was a more dangerous political force than the king's advisers. Friends were in the shadows, and you never knew who owed them favours, just that they had the power to make your life difficult, or end. The friend of god seemed much worse than that.

She didn't know if Trei would like being called a friend. She wasn't even sure why he'd answered her prayers to save her children. Right now, the entire world must be crying out for his attention, begging for him to save them. However, explaining that Trei had a passing familiarity with her required more answers than Dyys could be bothered giving.

The mayor nodded slowly, "I leave the defence of Be Liphu to you. I will help the people."

Dyys nodded, "Good."

Then she walked back outside to wait the return of the messenger, with Ausosa's answer.

Dyys

She leaned forward, her eyes flashing, “Astarte. Do you see the rider?”

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"So you call me a skulking thing of hell?" She spat on the ground, "Though, I did live in hell for a few thousand years. A prisoner. All my people were. I spent the first five hundred years of life in Solas, before it existed. We are Furies. Created by Yio, to defend this world. When you call a Fury, demon, you call us the name of that which enslaved us. I think you can understand my problem with that."

He nodded slowly, "That I can. Yet... You said Ausosa killed your master."

She held up a hand quickly, "Not what you think. I was not her slave. I was hers. I gave myself to her."

The messenger winced, "Your bride. Our goddess, killed your bride."

Dyys nodded, "Yes. She also tried to kill me. Didn't quite succeed. But she'll know my name. Make sure you don't shout it. She might kill you."

The messenger shook his head, "So there's no way you will surrender?"

"Not unconditionally." Dyys smiled, "I will hold this city. That doesn't mean there isn't room for movement. But it will mean that Fae being flexible."

He nodded slowly, and turned and began walking back through the flames. She watched him go carefully. Not a single hesitation in his footsteps, despite what she'd told him, the way she'd surprised him. She liked him.

She closed the fire, and turned and walked inside. She looked at the mayor, standing there nervously, and smiled weakly, "Ausosa demands unconditional surrender. Probably to butcher you all."

The mayor winced, and Dyys smiled, "Calm. You have an army here. We're holding. Unless the goddess herself attacks, that situation isn't likely to change. You need to be focused on your people. Evacuate them to safe areas. Make sure we have food and water supplies, and any other

living in siege conditions crap I haven't thought of."

The mayor nodded slowly, "What is this going to be? Between you and me?"

"I'm your patron." Dyys shrugged, "I'll help you out, any time the city is in danger. In exchange, you let me go my way."

The man smiled slowly, "I thought you were Trei'el's champion. A champion of a new god."

"No." Dyys laughed, "No... Trei is more of a friend."

His humour evaporated as he tried to comprehend a person who was a friend to a god. Not just a god, the head of the new pantheon of gods. Gods who showed a willingness to break the rules, to walk among men and women like it was nothing.

The friend of a king was a more dangerous political force than the king's advisors. Friends were in the shadows, and you never knew who owed them favours, just that they had the power to make your life difficult, or end. The friend of god seemed much worse than that.

She didn't know if Trei would like being called a friend. She wasn't even sure why he'd answered her prayers to save her children. Right now, the entire world must be crying out for his attention, begging for him to save them. However, explaining that Trei had a passing familiarity with her required more answers than Dyys could be bothered giving.

The mayor nodded slowly, "I leave the defense of Be Liphu to you. I will help the people."

Dyys nodded, "Good."

Then she walked back outside to wait the return of the messenger, with Ausosa's answer.

Trei

“Lady Summer!” The cafe owner exclaimed in excitement as he saw the party approaching. She smiled warmly at him, “Davos. Still sourcing coffee in the midst of all this?”

Davos shrugged, “Where I can. I’m afraid I’ve had to start taking some from Faith’s garden.”

The Faeling bristled angrily. She’d planted a garden next to some of the tables, without his permission. Nobody was generally allowed to touch it. She kept it at the prime of its life, permanently. It was almost as if it wasn’t alive, but just an image of the living thing. Like living statues.

Davos spread his hands, “I’m sorry. I tried not to.”

Summer patted her on the head, “She’s just a bit grumpy since coming back. Her dad did something incredibly stupid to resurrect us.”

Faith knocked the hand away, “And Ausosa got my age wrong. I was two. Not ten.”

Trei intervened, “A table?”

Davos did a quick head count and began arranging for them to sit together. It was an odd group, Trei had to admit. At least he was the only non-Fae, and his eyes were enough to make nobody question why he was with them.

Summer sat down slowly, and scattered some dust over the dying flower at the table. It sprang to life blooming, and she plucked a petal to chew, whilst angrily glaring at him.

She wasn’t about to forgive him. He wondered if she’d worked it out, like Faith apparently already had. That Ausosa hadn’t brought them back, not really. They hadn’t been saved from death in the lifestream, hadn’t been resurrected.

They weren’t who they thought they were. They were memories. His memories. He should have noticed it from the way Ausosa brought the room in the garden back. She captured memories, and breathed life into them.

Summer leaned in next to him and whispered in his ear, “You’re broadcasting your thoughts so loudly, even I can hear them.”

He winced, looking down. She elbowed him, “So what? I know what you did. I’m pissed, but I’m not about to have an existential crisis over it. I’m close enough to her, aren’t I?”

Trei frowned, “If I don’t say yes, you’re going to hit me. Aren’t you?”

“Probably.”

He grinned at her, “Who cares about the method? I have you back.”

“I care. A lot.” Summer glared, “The method includes this idiotic agreement not to go after my sister who is threatening to destroy existence itself to get at her manipulative boyfriend who murdered someone to get her.”

Faith sat at the table, after inspecting her garden, and glared, “So it is your fault that I’m older. Thanks, dad.”

He shrugged, “Sorry?”

“Forget it.” Faith said, blowing a wisp of her red hair, “I’ll deal with it. What are we going to do about my aunt?”

“You?” Trei raised an eyebrow, “Nothing. You’re actually going to stay put for once and not shatter any dimensional barriers.”

Faith grinned, “Oh. So that’s why I’m older. Because you’ve been dreaming about having rules I actually have to follow. Yeah, not happening.”

Trei sighed, “Ausosa will kill you. Again.”

Talin raised a timid hand, “Weren’t we coming here to not brood about this?”

Faith rolled her eyes, a small cube of amber appearing in her hand and she tossed it into her mouth. She already had a sweet tooth and the power to summon whatever treat she wanted. That was going to be a problem.

Ashwen leaned forward, “I know you all have serious problems with me. And for good reason. But I . . .”

“She lied.” Faith shrugged, “She got some of them out before the realm collapsed. Enough to be an army. She was thinking about killing you, dad.”

Summer glared, “Faith. Just because we can read thoughts doesn’t mean we go ahead and broadcast them.”

The Faeling stuck out her tongue and went back to staring at the sky and tossing snacks into her mouth.

Trei nodded, “I know, Ashwen. I was waiting for you to tell me.”

The brunette nodded slowly, and sighed, “Well, I need to use them. I’ll be leaving this little group. I’ll be heading to Mishia once we’re done here. I got an invite. A letter, telling me it was time to bring the army there, delivered by hellhound.”

Trei grinned at that, “Alfar.”

Summer glared at him, “And who is Alfar?”

“An elf. She’s lived her whole life in Mishia.” Trei shrugged, “She also has no ability to control what she sees. She sees every timeline. Like a Fate, but, without the control that comes with it.”

Summer frowned, “And why have you not introduced us?”

“Because she’s never met you.” Trei replied carefully, and Summer scratched her head. “Okay . . . Things get weird with time. Don’t think I’ll let you off the hook.”

“She has no true love.” Trei said with exasperation, “There’s nothing for me to screw up. The closest she has is her hellhound. She spoils it.”

“Garmr?” Faith said looking up in surprise, “Is that him?”

Trei groaned, “How do you know him?”

“I’ve met them, I guess.” Faith shrugged, “One of my multidimensional hops you get so pissy about. I wonder if she’d recognise me now you’ve screwed up my age?”

“It’s Alfar.” Trei laughed, “She wouldn’t even notice the difference.”

Summer tapped her fingers, “So, Ashwen. You’re going to war against Ausosa.”

“More Zanzfir.” The Fae shrugged, “I’m pretty sure. Kru had been bringing them in as her way of controlling the treaty signing. Ausosa kind of hijacked their cult.”

“An army of humans against how many Fae?” Summer asked dubiously, and Ashwen winced,

“Only about a hundred of us survived. Most are injured, so we’re weaker. Not quite as strong. Magic is tainted, so we can’t use it in battle safely. Mostly just our speed and strength.”

Trei laughed, “Against how many humans?”

“Five thousand or so.” Ashwen said, “Or that was it when I checked last night. Mishia was holding their own, but not great. A nation of spellcasters does better than most, but there are still five thousand enemy spellcasters.”

Summer nodded slowly, “You should be able to walk through them, Ashwen. Make sure that you do.”

The Fae winced, nodding quickly towards the woman she’d attempted to kill and steal the crown from.

Faith pouted, “I want a muffin.”

Trei sighed, “Then I guess we should order. Talin, what would you like?”

The nervous Fae smiled weakly, “I’m fine.”

Summer rolled her eyes, “No, you’re thinking about being alone at the house with my family. It’s okay, Talin. We’re all family now. So, pancakes?”

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Antoinette

She had no idea where she'd been sent by the Gateway. The last thing she'd seen before being yanked through the wall between worlds was Alteo being torn apart by lightning.

She was left with that as her last sight. There was no light here, at all. It was just dark, and cold.

It was quiet, but not silent. She was trying to control her terrified breathing, because there was something else breathing in this space. Quiet, and slow, like it was asleep. She hoped it was going to stay that way.

She didn't know where the shrine was, but she had a feeling that this was not it, and that she'd just been suckered into something much worse. Like becoming a sacrifice to whatever was here.

The Sibyls had to have known. Had to have seen what was here, and they had sent her here alone. Allowed their First to die to get her here. What had they been thinking? What had motivated them?

She knew she should be doing something, but she was too afraid to. She knew that this was a prison of some sort. It had to be. A place designed to contain something. That must be what the shrines had been for. Seals holding something back, keeping it locked away from the rest of the 'verse.

Shannon's voice had gone silent. She was alone here. Alone with whatever else inhabited this cold and empty place. She could feel a rough rocky floor, but not walls. No roof. She couldn't tell how big it was without making too much noise, but it felt like a large space.

Antoinette just felt lost, here.

She'd come expecting to find a shrine, that she could break, and help the Sibyl somehow. Come with the expectation she could stop a war, but this was not that. This was something else altogether.

"Hafelfin." A voice rumbled across the ground, and Antoinette's eyes nearly popped out of her skull in terror. She turned slowly, suddenly aware she hadn't emptied her bladder since she'd been imprisoned.

A speck of light appeared, somewhere in the distance, outlining a shadow in the darkness, the outline seemed almost human. It beckoned to her. She did not particularly want to follow through with it, but she couldn't run. She had nowhere to run to.

She walked slowly, her heart fluttering and the ground feeling like it was sloping away beneath her. She tried to calm herself, to steel herself, but it was pointless. Her every instinct was that whoever this was, it was worse than anything she had ever met before.

It wasn't human.

Antoinette stared in surprise at the wings curled up behind it. She couldn't make them out clearly, but they were there. There was only one thing she knew of with wings like that. "You're Fae?"

The figure chuckled, the light dancing across them. From what she could tell, they were naked. A naked Fae in the middle of cavern only reachable by an ancient transport device. None of this felt right.

"My name is Pheter." The Fae said, bowing in a way that felt almost mocking, "What is yours, hafelfin?"

“Antoinette.” She answered carefully. There was no point lying. Names didn’t mean much, and most Fae could read thoughts. He hadn’t made a single threatening move towards her, and she felt like she was gearing up for the fight of her life.

He crouched, looking at the ground as she came close, “It has been a very long time since I’ve seen anyone. It took an elf and a Fae to close the doors to this place. It would take both to open it. I don’t think my queen considered that a hafelfin would be enough, that they could even exist. All peoples were young back then.”

She swallowed, and he looked up at her, “What... Is a human?”

Antoinette blinked, “Oh. That long? Wow. Humanity is... Itself.”

“Images. Of war. Sword and shield. Spear and lance.” The man said, “You see these when you see humanity. A warlike people. Desperate to destroy each other. Abandoned by the Fae and elfin. Even creating worse warlike races, like the orks and goblins.”

She swallowed nervously. She had no idea how he would react to the idea of her people. She knew most Fae hated humanity, considering them lesser creatures. That a number had just wanted to wipe them off the face of the world.

“Who created humanity?” Pheter asked in surprise.

She shrugged, “You’re inside my head. You know I don’t know. I don’t think anyone knows.”

“You’ve met Sumner.” He mused, “She was... Pregnant? What the ash. Our goddess, has found a way to do what I tried to do. Typical. I get imprisoned for all time for my crimes. She lives out her happily ever after.”

“Ausosa killed her, if that makes you feel better.” Antoinette snapped angrily.

Pheter reeled, holding his head, “No. Too much. Gods... Oh gods... What did Ausosa do? Kao... Beautiful Meria... Yio... She killed them all? What?”

Antoinette knelt down slowly, “Who are you? Why were you imprisoned here?”

“I am Pheter.” He snapped, as if it were an answer, “I was imprisoned here for killing a Fae. I was the first of my kind to kill another. Tyr was hurting Ausosa. He was torturing her, trying to manipulate her genetic structures. He was trying to make her... Capable of being pregnant. He experimented on her, and she was too scared to stop him. So I did.”

She heard the bitterness in his voice. He didn’t regret what he had done. He still felt his actions were justified, and yet he’d been lying in this place since before humanity even existed.

He rubbed his head, “The way you see the world... What is left of it... When I was there, Antoinette, all peoples lived together. One world. The two continents and the archipelago. All peoples. This... Segregation between the species. It happened after I died. I don’t understand it.”

“The Fae ran away from humanity.” Antoinette sighed, “They thought we’d kill ourselves. The elfin ran away from everybody. The gods made treaties, swearing never to intervene in the world again.”

“I thought that the sins of Wintralassa had ended.” Pheter said sadly, “It seems I became their heir. My love became my own heir, and now the world suffers for it. I would never have condoned what Ausosa has done.”

Antoinette stared, trying to see his face in the near dark. She couldn’t see what face he was making. Couldn’t tell how serious he was about this. If it was true, then he might be capable of

stopping her.

A chance to bring everything back to a balance.

“You lost someone. What was her name?”

“Shannon.” Antoinette said, tears instantly spring into her eyes. She couldn’t bring herself to say anything else. Her throat had closed up. She lost her. Killed by Ausosa, for daring to look for peace.

“A broken heart. A hafelfin.” He said, standing up slowly, “You’ll do to break the seal.”

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Aurili

She stood up shakily, the tears dried against her face. Her cheeks were swollen and her eyes were reddened. She felt weak and tired and like nothing mattered anymore. She felt empty.

"You got angry." A voice spoke in front of her, and she stared in surprise. She hadn't noticed them, but there was someone there. The body was transparent, and almost seemed to be liquid, shifting form too quickly for her to comprehend it.

Aurili spoke with a hoarse voice, "So?"

"Angry is good." The woman, and she was fairly certain this formless something was a woman, "Angry gets shit done."

Aurili glared at her, "What the fuck does that mean?"

"Let me tell you a story." The woman replied coyly, cocking what might sometimes become a hip, "Once upon a time, humanity got fucked. Humanity is pretty good at screwing itself up. Slavery, and hatred. Owning someone because of the colour of their skin. That's pretty fucked up. But, along came the Fae, and they fucked y'all. They decided to shorten your lifespan, and take away your magic, because y'all were crazy bastards.

You fought back, and drove the Fae to create new worlds just to escape every sickening thing you did to them in war. You were so twisted the Fae began to hate war itself because of the kind of shit you pulled. You inspired one of the Fae to murder another, and that was when humanity fucked us all.

Tyr was reborn, trapped outside the motherfucking 'verse. Barely able to interact with it, going insane as his endless lifespan suddenly became goddamn infinite. He saw what he was, and what he would be, and it drove him out of his fucking mind.

Ausosa was imprisoned in hell and became the most resentful bitch the worlds have ever known. So she decided she'd take humanity and use it to kill everyone. She took the violent creativity of your race and used it to rip open holes in reality. Because that's what a sane bitch does.

Trei became the power that she could tap into, by straight up murdering his daughter. Ausosa took her blood, and fucked the lifestream. Then she went and fucked the gods, so none of them could get in her godsdamned way.

Angry, gets shit done, little Aurili. There's a reason Ausosa is fucking scared of the Fury. That bitch knows how to get shit done. She uses her anger and makes sure that even a god backs the fuck off.

What do you do with your anger? Cry and piss yourself? It is time to grow up, bitch! Time you realised what you are and what you can do. Time for you to stand up and take the fight to Ausosa. Because I am fucking tired of watching you cry every fucking time you manage to find your way back to the Void."

Aurili swung her fist, but it splashed into something incredibly slimy, and didn't seem to affect the woman at all. She pulled it back and shook it with disgust, but it didn't seem to really work.

The formless thing smiled at her, "That's anger, but hitting me is kinda pointless, don't you think? Why don't you try and hit the bitch that hurt you instead?"

"Give her to me!" Aurili shouted angrily, eyes flashing.

The goddess stared in surprise, "You want little Lil? Still? Don't you think she'd be pissed to

see you in this kind of state?”

Aurili glared, “Fuck the world. Fuck the gods. None of that shit ever meant anything. We just go through the same thing, time and again, of the gods fucking us all to death. I’m over it! I just want Lilibeth. The rest of the ’verse can go fuck itself!”

The goddess shrugged, “Shit doesn’t work that way.”

“I don’t care!” Aurili screamed, punching again. This time she hit something solid, and the goddess seemed to evaporate.

She stared in surprise, and then felt a cold and wet hand land on her shoulder, “Not bad. Not great. If you’re really going to become the next god of war, I think you need to kick it up a notch.”

Aurili spun, glaring at her, “What? I don’t want to be a god.”

“No one ever did, sweetie.” The goddess laughed at her, “Yio gave it up in a heartbeat, just to try and make sure her friends survived. She totally failed and Kru became a complete psychopath, but a Fate didn’t want to be a Fate. Trei refused his mantle and tried to play the good husband, looking after the Evening Realms, and totally missed what Ausosa was planning because of it. He missed Drak’tur being inspired to attack Eldrasa by the Fel.”

Aurili clenched her fists, glaring, “I am not a god. I’m a soldier. I do what I have to do.”

“What you have to do, right now, is fight. You’re a pretty little thing, but you don’t get to choose what shit the ’verse shovels on you. You don’t get a reward without fighting for it. Ausosa teased you with a memory of Lilibeth, and then killed her. What that bitch didn’t realise is who you are. What you are. Shannon gave up the title. She didn’t become the goddess of war. You did.” The formless god touched a solid hand to her chin, “Head up, little girl. You’ve got a war to become.”

“No!” Aurili shouted, shaking her head, “Fuck all of that! I just want Lilibeth. I don’t want any of this. If I’m a god, then I can say that. I can make it happen. Make you all leave me alone!”

“No.” The goddess shook her head, “I mean, look at me. I’m retired, I lost my divinity, and then got fucking murdered, and I’m still here. Still doing what I have to do.”

Aurili glared down at her clenched fists, feeling the tears beginning again. Every time she thought she had control of herself, something like this came along. Made her hurt all over again.

She wasn’t allowed to burn out. She wasn’t allowed to take a moment to hurt. She was forced face-first into all of this. Forced to be a weapon of war, when war shouldn’t even be happening. The whole ’verse should be uniting against Ausosa, and instead she was conquering it.

“What does Ausosa even want?”

“To kill Pheter.” The goddess shrugged, “For killing Tyr.”

Aurili felt herself getting angrier, as she saw a golden light beginning to shine out from around her fists. She didn’t know what it was, or if it was just from the blur as tears fell slowly. “She killed everyone... She killed Lilibeth... Just to take revenge?”

“You got it.” The goddess laughed, “Vengeance against Pheter, and Summer and humanity. Ausosa is in this just to make y’all hurt.”

“Who are you?” Aurili glared up at her, “Who the fuck are you?”

“Kao.” The goddess replied and shrugged, “And when you see Ausosa, kill her for me too. For killing me, and killing Wintry who had fuck all to do with this.”

“What do you mean?”

The goddess shrugged, and Aurili felt a headache slam into her head, knocking her to the ground.

Aurili

She stood up shakily, the tears dried against her face. Her cheeks were swollen and her eyes were reddened. She felt weak and tired and like nothing mattered anymore. She felt empty.

"You got angry." A voice spoke in front of her, and she stared in surprise. She hadn't noticed them, but there was someone there. The body was transparent, and almost seemed to be liquid, shifting form too quickly for her to comprehend it.

Aurili spoke with a hoarse voice, "So?"

"Angry is good." The woman, and she was fairly certain this formless something was a woman, "Angry gets shit done."

Aurili glared at her, "What the fuck does that mean?"

"Let me tell you a story." The woman replied coyly, cocking what might sometimes become a hip, "Once upon a time, humanity got fucked. Humanity is pretty good at screwing itself up. Slavery, and hatred. Owning someone because of the colour of their skin. That's pretty fucked up. But, along came the Fae, and they fucked y'all. They decided to shorten your lifespan, and take away your magic, because y'all were crazy bastards.

You fought back, and drove the Fae to create new worlds just to escape every sickening thing you did to them in war. You were so twisted the Fae began to hate war itself because of the kind of shit you pulled. You inspired one of the Fae to murder another, and that was when humanity fucked us all.

Tyr was reborn, trapped outside the motherfucking 'verse. Barely able to interact with it, going insane as his endless lifespan suddenly became goddamn infinite. He saw what he was, and what he would be, and it drove him out of his fucking mind.

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The goddess shrugged, and Aurili felt a headache slam into her head, knocking her to the ground.

Alfar

She smiled as the Fae snapped into existence in the square. Smiled as the Fae walked slowly across the ground, gathering magic and the Fel around her. The ground cracked and died. Trees withered. Grass and weeds curled up like they were burned.

Ausosa glared at her, and knocked aside the barrier, shattering it like it had never existed. The Fae pointed an accusing finger, “I told you I had to kill you, elf!”

Alfar smiled, and patted Garmr’s head, “Time to go.”

The hellhound disappeared as it ran quickly, a message in it’s jaws. He would run and he would arrive yesterday, at the moment which could change this outcome. Time was in flux. The events were no longer fixed.

Alfar grinned as Ausosa stood over her, “I do remember you killing me. It won’t happen today though, because today is the day.”

The Fae glared hatred at her, “I should have killed you a long time ago.”

“But you couldn’t. Because you haven’t.” Alfar smiled, “You just don’t get it, do you? You are not a goddess, bitch. Just because you have the power is not enough. It doesn’t make you ascend. Power is given to those who need it, not to those who want it. Never want.”

Ausosa punched her. Alfar felt her right fang break off, and she coughed it up as she hit the ground hard enough to crack her skull. She looked up, smiling, “It doesn’t end this way. I remember.”

Ausosa brought her foot down against her chest. Ribs shattered, puncturing her lungs. Blood began to fill them almost immediately. Drowning her. Drowning her in the misery of the ’verse. The sadness it felt in this moment. Her sadness. Not Alfar’s, hers.

“Ausosa!” The voice roared out, shattering every window in the square. The ground recoiled. The remnants of trees exploded into ash. The entire world felt the pain of that scream, of that voice. Her voice.

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The Fae turned, and barely managed to shield herself with a wing as a sword flashed into her, fast enough to bend the metal. Ausosa was knocked backwards.

Alfar sat up slowly, and giggled as she felt Garmr’s tongue on her face. Her fang began to grow backwards as her skull knitted together. The love of a hellhound was a special thing. A precious and magical thing.

She pulled herself upright, nuzzling her face into the burned metal of his fur. “Have a tough time?”

He let out a low moan, and she nodded, “I’m sorry I sent you. I had hoped this was the one where Aurili called Ashwen, but it wasn’t.”

A rift opened in the air, and the hellhound growled at it, glaring. Alfar patted his head, “It’s just Ashwen, come to do what she didn’t want to do, but had to do.”

The brunette Fae emerged, sword in hand, followed by others. “Spread out. Contain the area. Holy shit, is that a human fighting Ausosa? Stay out of their way.”

Alfar smiled and waved, “Hey, Ash!”

The Fae glared at her, “Who the Void are you?”

“Alfar.” She smiled, skipping over, “We’re friends. I remember when you told me about kissing Janus. He tasted funny.”

Ashwen blushed in embarrassment, “Did I. Well. Not yet.”

“No.” Alfar’s face fell, “No, I guess right now you’re just the angry woman who hasn’t forgiven herself for falling for a dick, yet. We all do, sometimes. Well, most of us.”

Ashwen rolled her eyes, “Really. How do I win this, prophet?”

“I’m a Sibyl.” She said, pouting, “Not a prophet. You win by being Ashwen. That’s what it takes to win. Be Ashwen.”

The Fae rolled her eyes, and then tossed and caught her sword, “Be me? I can do that. I can slaughter some humans.”

“Don’t forget to grab the peppermint.” Alfar grinned, and the Fae disappeared into the air with a blast of wind.

She was happy to see her. Ashwen was a nice Fae. She always remembered to bring a treat when she saw Alfar. She liked tea. She wouldn’t forgive herself, not yet. There was a day when Ashwen would remember to forgive herself. It was a sad day.

The hellhound nosed her from behind, letting out a worried sound. Alfar shook her head, sitting down, “No, Garmr. We won’t get hurt. Not here. We need to wait, still. Wait for him. That’s my job. You can go play with the soldiers if you want.”

The hellhound let out a blood-chilling howl, and then bounded into the fight again. He enjoyed it. It was what he was designed for. Destroying threats too powerful to approach.

Alfar relaxed onto the ground, only vaguely aware of the fight happening nearby. The ground rippled with each of their blows, reminding her of the rocking of a boat on the sea. It made her feel tired.

Kao sat down next to her, “What do you think? Does she have what it will take?”

Alfar shrugged, “She will. The world changes because of her. He doesn’t. He isn’t nice.”

The goddess smiled and patted her head, “Thank you. But I think its time you sent me back where I came from. Helping out Aurili was a one time thing. I can’t stay.”

“You do stay.” Alfar pouted, “With Wintry.”

Kao looked at her in shock, “Wintry is dead. Even her memory is gone. She was killed by Zanfir.”

Alfar grinned and kissed her nose, “Nope. I sent you a friend. He’s very loud and very angry. He’s with Wintry.”

Kao vanished. Alfar saw her smile as she embraced the woman she’d risked the entire ’verse over, multiple times. Saw them cry as they held each other, in the burned out ruins of a valley, whilst a grumpy creature watched on from nearby.

He glared at her, watching, “What do you want, elf?”

She shrugged, “Just remembering this moment, Nidoghr. Remembering their happy.”

The wyrm grunted, and looked away from her, “Don’t you have things to do?”

He was right, in a way. What she had to do, was lie here and wait. The moment wasn't right yet, not complete. The events would become fixed soon, the end inevitable. She had to wait, so she could shift it one last time. One more thing, and the bitch would be dead.

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Dyys

The messenger walked back through the wall of flames, as Dyys considered whether or not to close them in around him. The screams would be extremely satisfying. She hadn't got to see anyone she'd killed yet. Didn't get to see them regret crossing her.

The man bowed as he walked in front of her, "The goddess Ausosa heard your response."

Dyys shrugged, "And?"

"She swears she will take Be Liphu from you. She promises she will bathe in the blood of your children. She promises to put the head of the Hekate on a pike at the top of the gate to the city. She swears she will make you relive Bel's death until you kill yourself for her." The messenger replied, cringing at every word.

Dyys rolled her jaw slowly, and frowned. "Interesting. She told you would die if you said this to my face, and yet you still came."

"I serve the goddess." The man said stiffly, standing up and waiting for his death.

"Astarte." Dyys called quietly, and her daughter landed on her shoulder with a solid thump, "Ton ma?"

She waved at the messenger, "Are you feeling hungry?"

"Mek'ta'vo." Astarte stated with irritation. She really didn't care about the mortals at all. They weren't worth her effort to intimidate.

Dyys shrugged, "You're free to go, messenger. I'll be Ausosa soon."

He turned and moved through the passage in the flames, slow and steady, as if she hadn't just threatened to have him eaten alive. He was being too professional. Too strong. He didn't realise how weak he really was.

"Hurt him. Now." Dyys instructed.

The messenger screamed as he was suddenly flung through the air, his back torn open by a clawed hand.

Astarte pouted in front of her, and Dyys sighed, "We have to defend our home, Astarte. Sometimes that means doing things we don't want to do, and things we don't like. It is easiest to defend when no one wants to attack."

"To'va ka!" Astarte snapped, "Dos na mi?"

Dyys smiled, "I talk like the mortals, because this their world. They don't speak Wyrddin. I'm not betraying you or your brother by being able to communicate. You can speak Common. Why not? Why do you hate to admit you live in the same world as them?"

Astarte flicked her tongue in the air, and sighed, "I . . . Don. Li'ik."

"This is our home, Astarte." Dyys smiled, "We're not going anywhere. We're not beaten or hated by the people, at least not yet. I am not going to hell, just to be a slave again."

The young Fury nodded slowly, wiping frustrated tears from her eyes, "Me'so va."

Dyys picked her up in a cuddle, "I feel alone, too, Astarte. The only thing I have close to a friend is a freaking Hekate."

"Ta'vin."

Dyys winced. Her daughter missed her sister. The one who hadn't survived. Who died by the hands of the Hekate, because she didn't know how to cope with the simplest of human emotions.

For now, they needed her. Dyys' anger at her hadn't gone away. She was trying to forgive her, but she wasn't getting very far with it. Her child was dead because of the idiot.

The ground rocked, and flames and debris blew towards them. Dyys spun, crouching and ignoring the pain in her stomach as the explosion hit her instead of the girl in her arms.

Dyys put her down gently, "Back inside, Astarte. Ausosa has sent her answer."

The girl rolled her eyes, and spoke carefully in the Common Tongue, "I am Fu'ray."

Dyys cracked her neck, and then jumped, landing atop the wall easily. She glared out as another fireball drifted through the air towards them. She flicked her wrist, and winced as it slammed into the barrier and nearly knocked her off her feet. She curled the barrier around the ball, and twisted it slowly. The sweat poured off her.

She released the ball, tossing it back towards the ship in the port that had sent it flying in the first place. She blinked away stars and winced as she saw three more.

Astarte landed next to her, and muttered angrily under her breath, and all three immediately reversed direction. Dyys smiled at her daughter with pride, and just a touch of horror.

"Do you want to stay here, and defend?"

"No." The girl shook her head, "Tat ka insulting. Ta thi'ink wii could et killed ta that."

Dyys hair began to glow, the snakes unwinding themselves and hissing to the air. She spread her claws, and the snake around her waist unravelled, balancing her. "Then lets take the fight to them."

Trei

Summer leaned on his shoulder, as he stood on the roof, watching the sunset. It was a brilliant red, deeper and stronger than most. It was the smoke. The sun shining through the distant smoke.

“You’re going to break your word, aren’t you?”

Trei smiled, “No. I just want to. I’m not losing you again.”

“You’re already going to.” She sighed, “You know that. The moment Ausosa dies, I’m gone. My link to this world is over.”

He shook his head, “Not necessarily. I think I know what I need to do, to save you. To turn a memory into the real thing. Don’t stab me.”

Summer blew his ear, “You’d deserve it for that insult.”

“Maybe.” He shrugged, “How would you have phrased it?”

“You think you can heal me.” She said pointedly, “Make me whole.”

Trei smiled, “As always. You’re right.”

“Oh, shut up.” She replied with irritation, “You know you can’t let Ausosa win. You’re the only god left. She killed the rest. You have to be the one to stop her.”

“Not this time.” Trei sighed, turning to her and putting his arms around her waist, “I never wanted to be a god, Summer. I just wanted you.”

Her fierce blue eyes stared back into his, “Nor did I. Didn’t even want to be queen. We just do what we have to. Right now, this world needs a god. Needs you to step up. I’m signing my death, Trei. I’m saying it’s okay to do what you have to do, not what you want to do.”

“Screw ’em.” Trei shrugged, “Summer, I already lost you once because I did what I had to do. I lost Faith, and I haven’t really got her back again. I found Talin buried in the ash of other Fae.”

Summer stared at him in confusion, “How did Talin survive?”

He shrugged, “Does it matter?”

“Ausosa.” Summer ground her fangs together, “That bitch. She’s been hiding out inside Talin. She’s a body-jumper. She’s been keeping an eye on you, when she isn’t running her war.”

“She’s in Shahr.” Trei said, “If she comes crawling back to Talin, we can catch her. But she has nothing to fear from me, right now.”

Summer slapped him, and turned away, “Remember how I told you if you ever did something as stupid as you did, I’d leave you?”

She left the answer hanging in the air as she jumped down.

Trei winced, feeling his eyes burn. Even a memory of Summer wasn’t willing to let the fight go. He’d betrayed a memory to resurrect one. It wasn’t enough. He’d given up everything, for nothing.

Summer was right. As always.

He stepped across the world and into Shahr. He grabbed the mage’s hand as lightning arc’d from it, and broke it. The mage screamed, and then fell as something burst through the chest at speed.

The blood-coated Fury paused to glare back at him, “Bak tar.”

They disappeared as he translated in his head slowly. About time. They were right. He had let himself be selfish and step back when he should have been devoting himself to a single perfect moment. The moment he choked the life out of the woman who killed his family.

He glared as lightning shot across his body, glaring at the dozen Zanfrian soldiers burning themselves out with magic, trying to hurt him. It wouldn't work. He'd died and reconstructed himself too many times, it was the first thing he'd learned to do.

Trei nodded gently, and they exploded. Ribs became shrapnel as blood filled the air like a mist, spraying everything.

Aurili

Ausosa wasn't a weak opponent. The Fae's wings were like armour, except the armour could hit back, and was razor sharp. She could feel a dozen places on her face bleeding from the damn things.

Her sword was useless. It wasn't even a sword anymore. It hadn't coped with the speed of her movements. Now it was just a heavy piece of metal banging uselessly against the Fae. If the elf had seen this coming, she should have given her something better.

Ausosa, on the other hand, had plenty of not useless weaponry. The Fel coiled around her like a living cloud. It blocked plenty of her blows, and stabbed her chest as she struck. What was left of her shirt was tatters, and blood. Skin hanging in chunks.

The Fae's fist was enough to shatter whatever was behind her when she dodged. She had a feeling it would be game over the moment she was knocked off her feet.

She didn't know how she was still on her feet, still fighting. Wounds less serious than these had completely sideswiped her in the past. Made her lie there coughing as other soldiers died to keep her safe.

That wouldn't happen this time. She was not going to sacrifice anyone else. She wasn't leading a legion in a time of war. She was standing up and fighting, because it was what she had to do. She wasn't going to put that on anyone else. This was her fight, and hers alone.

Lilibeth had stared up at her, the light fading from her pink eyes, as she struggled to say something. Struggled as she died. So Aurili would die the same way. Gasping her last and fighting.

Ausosa had taken her away, twice. Not this time. Not again. Not ever again. Nobody else would feel the pain that she had felt. She wouldn't allow it. She would kill Ausosa, and anyone who followed her. She would burn her out of the history books, and make everyone forget she had ever existed.

Aurili yelled grabbing the Fae's wrist and slammed the metal bat into the side of her head, dazing her. Before she could recover she slammed it downwards, through the Fae's foot and into the ground.

She grabbed Ausosa's shoulder and snapped her towards her as she headbutted. The woman recoiled with a crack, almost falling.

Ausosa winced, glaring up at her, "Is that all, mortal?"

A hand punched through her chest, breaking bones and tearing flesh. Ausosa's hands closed around her heart, and Aurili stared in horror, feeling the Fae's hand inside her.

Ausosa smiled casually, "Maybe that's why you could never say Lilibeth. You really are worthless, praetor."

The Fae tore her heart out with a snap of agony that knocked her to her knees. Ausosa tossed the remnants of the sword aside, dropping the heart to the ground and began to walk away, "That was an amusing distraction."

Aurili blinked, and she was in a field. Knee-high grass around her, a house on a distant hill. The wind whistled quietly overhead, and she could hear the birds calling to one another.

She blinked, falling forwards onto the stonework, arms covered in blood, watching the last of her life bleeding away. She wasn't breathing, she couldn't work out how to.

She gasped, finding herself on her back in the field, someone sitting on her chest, grinning at

her, "Hey."

Aurili reached up tentatively, blinking as she found herself back in Shahr. An empty and blood-stained hand reach for the heavens.

A hand caught hers. She was in the field. Lilibeth grinned at her, and kissed her hand, clean of the grime of war. "I've missed you."

Aurili burst into tears, "Lil..."

The brunette leaned down, her hair creating a barrier, making it just them, and Lilibeth kissed her gently. Her confusion faded, her desperation vanished. Lilibeth's lips were soft against her own, gentle. Not forcing her, but welcoming her. The woman leaned up, and kissed her nose.

She felt frightened tears running down her face, as those pink eyes sparkled, "It's time to get up, Aurili."

She shook her head in terror, seeing a flash of the burning streets. "I can't. I can't do it. I can't beat her."

Lilibeth rolled her eyes, "Who said you had to? All you have to do is try. That has always been enough for me. That you try. I'll be proud of you no matter what, Aurili. I will always love you. I will be waiting for you, right here. But right now, you have to get up."

"I can't." Aurili cried, her chest heaving.

Lilibeth stood up, holding out a hand, "I'll help you. Just this once."

Aurili reached for the hand hesitantly, not wanting for this to end. Not wanting to go back where she had been.

Lilibeth grabbed her, and hauled her upright.

Aurili stared at the bloodied street, gasping and barely breathing. She reached down weakly, picking up the remnants of her sword, and staggered forward a step.

She saw the ears of the Fae twitch, and Ausosa turned around slowly, staring at her in horror, not understanding how she was still moving. Not understanding what she was.

Aurili took another stumbling step forward.

Ausosa screamed, and shot towards her, surrounded by the black fires of hell. The Fae struck her at full force, as Aurili slammed the metal bar upwards, breaking ribs with an earth-shattering crunch.

Both of them hit the street, and Aurili grabbed the back of her neck with bloodied hands as she twisted, forcing the shrapnel further into her gut. She whispered weakly, blood spilling from her mouth, "You killed Lilibeth."

Ausosa stared in horror at the person in front of her. The person who had killed her. Not a god or a champion of the gods. Not a Fae or Fury. A human, weakest of the weak. A mortal, abandoned by her gods.

Ausosa went to say something, but black blood simply poured from her mouth, and then she dropped on top of Aurili, and went still. The black dust of the Fel fell to the ground.

Aurili smiled softly, looking at the stars in the sky. The stars reappearing, one by one.

Alfar

She stood up, walking over to the fallen Fae and kicked the bitch aside. She sighed, looking at the torn open cavity of the human's chest. It was sad, and broken, just like her heart.

Alfar knelt down gently, and smoothed out the hair of the dead woman as Garmr dropped the heart beside her with a horrifying squelch. She tapped Aurili's nose, "I told you, just because I'm only two hundred and eleven does not mean I'm a kid."

She sighed heavily, "I guess this gets to be my kiss. My only kiss. I was hoping I mis-remembered. That I could save it for Akheron. As infuriating as he is, he's also incredibly sweet."

As if on queue, she heard his voice in the distance, laughing as something exploded. He was young now, he wouldn't be when she knew him. When she kissed him against a tree.

Her tongue burned at the touch of his teeth, as he held her gently. Her hands weren't as gentle. She'd pinned him to the tree, not the other way around. Desperately trying to tell him she cared, when he'd finally given up on her and walked away. She hadn't meant to hurt him like that. She'd tried to fight her own fate, and instead had only fought with him.

Alfar squeezed her eyes shut, trying to find herself in the present again.

This kiss was different. It was the kiss. A promise given by the fates, to the elfin. A single promise. Alfar knew that the gods were just waking up. Just drawn back as reality tried to fix what Ausosa had been holding aside.

She didn't know if the Fates would hear her. All the same, she would try. She would do what she knew she already had, even if she didn't know the outcome.

There were so few events in history that she couldn't see. This was one of them, clouded out of existence by him. He tore apart all the timelines, because he shouldn't exist, not anymore. He'd been bound outside the walls of reality, in the nowhere. He'd been expected to die, but hadn't.

"From the shores, hidden by ancient mists." She sung quietly, causing Garmr to howl in pain, "Born aloft by an Elfin kiss. Clear the way, and lead you home, to eternal bliss."

She leaned forward, and kissed Aurili's forehead.

Dyys

She stood atop the ship, holding aloft the mortal by his throat. He struggled, looking at her with a fear that felt familiar, and refreshing. She'd spent a long time trying to pretend this wasn't her. As much as she wanted her children to believe she had never tried to fit in, she had.

She'd wanted to be human. Wanted to live beside her master, without turning any heads. She'd been ashamed of every part of her that Bel enjoyed. She was ashamed that she had more magic than any mortal ever could. Ashamed that she had a tail, that her teeth were made to shred flesh. Ashamed that she had claws, and not hands.

None of that had ever mattered to Bel. Not in the least. She'd found each aspect fascinating, but all the same they were things that made Dyys different than her. Too different. People could miss them at first glance, but not the second. She felt like she would have been a burden to her, the very thing she did not want to be.

Bel had cared for her, wanted her to be what she was. Dyys had murdered people in front of her, had offered her the blood running in her veins, and Bel had barely hesitated. It was one of the things that Dyys had found attractive about the woman. That she was willing to accept the good, with the bad. That she didn't judge her for her nature.

If she were here, Dyys imagined she'd be calling her an idiot for denying what she was for so long. For ignoring the screaming urges inside her skull to shatter bones and puncture lungs.

She looked at the mortal again. He really was afraid of dying. Terrified his last moments in this world were going to be this, hanging above his ship, held aloft by the incarnation of anger. She smiled at him sadly, as he dangled of the precipice of his own death. He was the last. The others had died quickly. Even the generals. Leaving only the cowardly captain of the ship.

Dyys glared at him, "How many people does it take to pilot this junk heap?"

The captain struggled, his face already white and lips purple, "Three."

"Navigator, pilot... What else?"

"Mage." He coughed weakly. That wasn't particularly surprising. Zanzir loved their magic. That the ship used magic as a source of propulsion, or navigation, wasn't entirely shocking.

Dyys shouted down to where Akheron was sulking, blowing up pieces of wood, "Can you find any other survivors? Hiding?"

He glanced up at his mother, "Ex'pa?"

"No." She rolled her eyes, "I need two survivors, at least one mage. Is that possible?"

Akheron stood up, stretching, and then vanished in a flash of red. He was getting faster, and better, at his dimensional jumping. That was an ability she hadn't seen in any Fury before. The ability to open portals between dimensions, yes, but that was difficult and draining. Opening a hole between hell and this plane had left Dyys exhausted. Akheron seemed to be able to jump through dozens a second without even affecting how tired he was.

That being said, Akheron was different. Not just because he was one of triplets, which was incredibly rare. He was male. The first male Fury that Dyys had ever encountered. In thousands of years, all Furies had been female. Always.

Now there was one who wasn't. She wasn't quite sure what to make of that. He might just be an oddity, but knowing the gods, he would be important to them. Which was a fate she really

wanted to avoid.

Selene landed on the ship, a human in either hand, and grinned up at her, “Better let him go if you expect him to survive.”

Dyys leapt down beside her, and released the captain. She smiled as he fell to his knees, coughing violently, “Well, I trust this is enough to pilot the ship.”

The captain nodded. She wasn’t sure if he was just desperate, or it was enough. Probably somewhere between the two.

“You will take this ship back to Zanfir. You will tell the Priestess that Be Liphu belongs to us. You will tell her that if she attacks us again, she best kill us. Or we will come to Zanfir.” Dyys crouched, lifting his chin to make him look her in the eyes, “And trust me, I will enjoy my time in Zanfir.”

She turned and jumped off the boat, Selene following in a more regal manner, still smiling. Her golden eyes were glowing, the Hekate in her in full swing. To be expected, with the violence. She needed the strength.

Selene smiled at her, “You’re being merciful. Is that unusual?”

“No.” Dyys replied, hating how ashamed she sounded as she said it. She was merciful. Hero had tried to beat that out of her, forcing her to commit worse and worse acts of cruelty. None of it had happened. It was part of who she was. She didn’t know if it was normal, the other Furies acted as embarrassed as if they’d wet themselves whenever they did something merciful, even if by accident. That might just be culture, or it might be a part of them.

Selene’s eyes turned dark, and she smiled at her again, something more genuine. “I’m glad I met you, Fury.”

Dyys laughed slowly, “I’m not sure I feel the same way.”

Selene nodded, pain showing on her face, “Fair.”

Dyys turned, looking at the city, “They’ve burned my home. I’m a bit irritated by that. I guess I should do some damage control. Not like the mayor will actually step up.”

Selene rubbed her neck, “Don’t you ever get tired? We’ve killed a few thousand people tonight. Used a crapload of magic. Also, you’ve stopped throwing up.”

“It’s clean.” Dyys mused quietly, “I’m not sure when. Recently. The lifestream is clean again. I guess someone took a bat to Ausosa’s face.”

Selene reached out, “It does feel different. I had to fight it before. Now if I fight it, it slips away. I have to be gentle. I thought I was just getting tired.”

“You are tired.” Dyys rolled her eyes, “But no, that is how it is supposed to be. The Fel is gone. I guess we have Trei to thank for that.”

Selene shrugged, “I guess. Are you sure Ausosa is dead? She scares me.”

“She should.” Dyys swallowed, “Woman killed a roomful of gods without breaking a sweat. Turned me to dust without even looking at me. No, I doubt she’s dead. Person like that can always survive.”

Akheron appeared, stepping uncomfortably onto the stone path that made up the edge of the port. Dyys remembered her first steps. They felt like walking barefoot on broken glass. Her scales had burned. They hadn’t peeled smoothly. Some had grown back in, under the skin, and she had to

dig them out with her claws.

The boy looked up at her, and grinned, showing off his tiny fangs, “Muk’to.”

She smiled at him, and picked him up, ignoring a protest. “Oh just settle. I don’t get to do this forever. Let’s go home.”

Astarte appeared on her shoulder, and Dyys rolled her eyes. The girl was peeling, and picking off the new skin like it wasn’t even a problem. If Akheron was the impulsive one, Astarte was the perfect one. The idol others looked up to without realising why.

Selene smiled weakly at them, terrified of them. Akheron ignored her. Astarte glared. They might take a shot at her, to kill her. Dyys wouldn’t stop them if they did, but she wouldn’t encourage it either. Living meant learning to forgive. Unfortunately.

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Trei

The city was lost. The smoke mixed with the smell of copper, as he looked across whatever was left. Most of the buildings were just glowing embers, cracking and spitting charred wood collapsing under its own weight.

It didn't matter that Zanfir were falling back. Mages left without anymore magic. Soldiers left without any will. Generals who knew they'd lost more than just a battle. Knew that when they went home, legends of the defenders of this place would grow.

They would go home. Broken, and defeated.

However, what they left behind would be even worse off. Rebuilding Shahr would be pointless. It'd take more effort to clean out the crap and build new foundations than it would be just to relocate. With things the way they were, that's what would happen.

Trei was broken as well. Just as broken as this burned out city. He'd known the moment that Ausosa died. Faith and Summer had vanished. He'd felt it, like he always felt it. They'd come back, just for a second. Come back long enough to tell him how stupid he was, and then they were gone.

Yet, it had been enough to remind him. To let him know that he was supposed to be the one to fix things, not to sit there and watch the world go past. Was supposed to be ready to take the fight to whoever threatened the peace.

It hadn't come soon enough. Someone else had killed Ausosa. Probably just an elf with a stray spear. Most important figures died by anonymous soldiers. Nobodies killed anybody in a war. Someone else had his revenge because he was too slow to act. So slow that the entire city went up in flames.

The flames were too much. The dead were too much. Too many people had fallen to protect this place. This was Ausosa's last aggravating touch. She had turned an empire into a dagger in his back. She'd set out to kill the nations, to try and doom humanity to a world at war, a horror they hadn't yet known. She might have succeeded.

He walked forward, reappearing in a bedroom adorned with gold, and red threads. The guards ran forward to defend their priestess, but they didn't get far. He didn't make any outward signs of any action, just waiting for the priestess to see him. The guards imploded. Became a screwed up ball of broken bones and muscles, fountaining blood unable to be contained in the much smaller shapes.

The priestess made no signs of fear as she sat up, looking at him. She made no outward signs of anything. She just watched him, waiting for him to be the one to make the next move.

"Your armies have been defeated." Trei said softly, his voice barely a whisper.

The priestess nodded slowly, "Should I thank you? Or apologise?"

"I had little to do with it." Trei smiled, "I mopped up some of your forces, true enough. Mishia and Solas were surprises for you. Balavid might be yours, for now. I wouldn't expect it to last."

The priestess sighed, "We served the goddess, she will reward us."

"Ausosa is dead." Trei replied, "Her corpse lies on the streets of Shahr. She'll be eaten by the rats, soon enough."

The priestess responded to that. He saw her revulsion, and righteous anger. Saw her wanting to rant and rave, to scream at him. She held back. She didn't know who he was yet, just knew he

had managed to cross an ocean in an instant. She might be guessing whether or not he had any strength left to fight, after the portal and destroying her guards.

She controlled herself, “You break into my bedroom. You kill my guards. You claim to have killed my goddess. Tell me, how exactly do you expect me to respond to that?”

“I didn’t kill Ausosa.” Trei replied, “I wish I had. She killed my wife. She killed my daughter. I don’t know if you know my name, if it has made it’s way all the way here, yet. But you should know it. Before you try and disrespect me by attempting to assassinate me. My name, is Trei.”

The priestess scrambled backwards in the bed, panicking. She hit her head on the back of the headboard. She looked at him with fear now. He didn’t particularly like it. It would be easier to say what he needed to if she hated him instead.

He didn’t like being feared. Didn’t like being reminded that for most people in the realms, he was the deciding factor between them continuing to breathe, or ending up being sent to the Hall of the Hells.

“So you have heard of me.” He forced himself to smile, “You screwed with people I care about. You worked for someone I would gladly have executed. Slowly. Inch by inch. Do I need to tell you what you need to do next, Priestess? Or do you understand the stakes?”

The woman pulled the blanket up to her chin, looking at him cautiously, “Zanfir will leave the East Continent.”

Trei nodded curtly, “Good enough.”

She shook her head, “No, it isn’t. I have crossed a god. This nation exists to serve the gods. Gods that I hear are dead, as well. If you are all that remains, then we must pay penance.”

“I’m not that kind of god.” Trei shook his head, “I just want everyone to stop butchering each other. I had enough of that when I served in the Ozandian army. Back when I was mortal.”

The Priestess nodded slowly, “I heard stories. That you were mortal. A blacksmith. I did not understand them. You are a god. Not just a god. You rule the gods. Though I suppose that means less now, than it did.”

“I was.” Trei nodded, “A terrible blacksmith. Really. An apprentice, that was so stupid, that I got toasted by a mage’s stray fireball. I got buried at the Pit, on the edge of Calis. Do you know what that is?”

“No.” The Priestess shook her head.

Trei sighed, “After they strip your body of any valuables, they throw you into a collection of bodies. To rot, and burn. The Pit is always on fire. Thanks to the plague, there are always more bodies to burn. Vastras used it as an energy collector.”

The Priestess shivered, clearly disgusted, “You, who became a god, were thrown into this place?”

“I was a pretty worthless human being.” Trei laughed, “But Summer brought me back. As a ghoul, and something more. That was the catalyst to my ascent. I died a poor death, and then I was resurrected as something sort of horrible. Yet, Summer loved me. That’s what preserved me. Made me become what I needed to be.”

The woman shook her head, “I do not understand it. Not as a god. How can... You come from such a place?”

“Because gods aren’t what you think we are.” Trei snapped, “We’re not pretty perfect things sitting on a shelf. We destroy lives. That’s what we’re good at. Our champions are cursed to have to deal with us. They have their lives wrecked, and the lives of anyone touched by them. We are violence and change. How can you expect us to be radiant?”

The Priestess sighed heavily, “If that is what you say, I cannot argue.”

“Gods get it wrong.” Trei replied, “Or they wouldn’t all be dead, would they?”

The woman sighed, “I am forced to admit it.”

“Good.” Trei nodded, “Then maybe you should realise the problems your country has. That focusing on religious hatred has brought all the crazies out of the woodwork. That when you declare peace, because I’m forcing it on you, that is when they will come for you. Your country won’t have peace. It will have chaos. Hatred begets hatred, and you’ve been on that cycle for so long there’s no escaping it anymore.”

The Priestess looked at him and nodded, “I am aware. The people are starving. The fire in the sky, it hurt us. There is no food. No water. The poor are dying from disease, and even the rich suffer. Our magic is tainted. Only the stones are free of it, and the mines are running dry. This was a chance. To find something better.”

“The calamity did that everywhere.” Trei replied, “A cost of the gods fighting each other. A cost caused by a human trying to stop Ausosa from turning a god into her personal puppet.”

The Priestess nodded, fear in her eyes.

Trei smiled slowly, and held up his hand. There was a flash of light as a scroll appeared in his hand. He tossed it onto her bed, “This is a spell. A Fury found it. It can heal the effects of the calamity. Maybe that might be something to help. It will still be difficult. You have a very angry country, right now. The nations around you are nervous. But this is what I give you. Don’t make me clean up a mess for you, again.”

She nodded.

He turned, reappearing in his quiet house. It was quiet, this place in Namatay. There was nobody else here. Not even Talin.

Ashwen was fighting her war, defending her people. Picking up the pieces of whoever survived Shahr’s destruction. She was a good leader, albeit naive. Maybe her time across the Void had been enough. She might be a queen now, just like she wanted. He knew he certainly didn’t want to be king. Not with Summer gone.

This would be his home, regardless of whatever came next. He felt content with that, more content than he should have been. A space, to grieve. Maybe that wasn’t a terrible thing.

Trei

The city was lost. The smoke mixed with the smell of copper, as he looked across whatever was left. Most of the buildings were just glowing embers, cracking and spitting charred wood collapsing under its own weight.

It didn't matter that Zanfir were falling back. Mages left without anymore magic. Soldiers left without any will. Generals who knew they'd lost more than just a battle. Knew that when they went home, legends of the defenders of this place would grow.

They would go home. Broken, and defeated.

However, what they left behind would be even worse off. Rebuilding Shahr would be pointless. It'd take more effort to clean out the crap and build new foundations than it would be just to relocate. With things the way they were, that's what would happen.

Trei was broken as well. Just as broken as this burned out city. He'd known the moment that Ausosa died. Faith and Summer had vanished. He'd felt it, like he always felt it. They'd come back, just for a second. Come back long enough to tell him how stupid he was, and then they were gone.

Yet, it had been enough to remind him. To let him know that he was supposed to be the one to fix things, not to sit there and watch the world go past. Was supposed to be ready to take the fight to whoever threatened the peace.

It hadn't come soon enough. Someone else had killed Ausosa. Probably just an elf with a stray spear. Most important figures died by anonymous soldiers. Nobodies killed anybody in a war. Someone else had his revenge because he was too slow to act. So slow that the entire city went up in flames.

The flames were too much. The dead were too much. Too many people had fallen to protect this place. This was Ausosa's last aggravating touch. She had turned an empire into a dagger in his back. She'd set out to kill the nations, to try and doom humanity to a world at war, a horror they hadn't yet known. She might have succeeded.

He walked forward, reappearing in a bedroom adorned with gold, and red threads. The guards ran forward to defend their priestess, but they didn't get far. He didn't make any outward signs of any action, just waiting for the priestess to see him. The guards imploded. Became a screwed up ball of broken bones and muscles, fountaing blood unable to be contained in the much smaller shapes.

The priestess made no signs of fear as she sat up, looking at him. She made no outward signs of anything. She just watched him, waiting for him to be the one to make the next move.

"Your armies have been defeated." Trei said softly, his voice barely a whisper.

The priestess nodded slowly, "Should I thank you? Or apologise?"

"I had little to do with it." Trei smiled, "I mopped up some of your forces, true enough. Mishia and Solas were surprises for you. Balavid might be yours, for now. I wouldn't expect it to last."

The priestess sighed, "We served the goddess, she will reward us."

"Ausosa is dead." Trei replied, "Her corpse lies on the streets of Shahr. She'll be eaten by the rats, soon enough."

The priestess responded to that. He saw her revulsion, and righteous anger. Saw her wanting to rant and rave, to scream at him. She held back. She didn't know who he was yet, just knew he

had managed to cross an ocean in an instant. She might be guessing whether or not he had any strength left to fight, after the portal and destroying her guards.

She controlled herself, “You break into my bedroom. You kill my guards. You claim to have killed my goddess. Tell me, how exactly do you expect me to respond to that?”

“I didn’t kill Ausosa.” Trei replied, “I wish I had. She killed my wife. She killed my daughter. I don’t know if you know my name, if it has made it’s way all the way here, yet. But you should know it. Before you try and disrespect me by attempting to assassinate me. My name, is Trei.”

The priestess scrambled backwards in the bed, panicking. She hit her head on the back of the headboard. She looked at him with fear now. He didn’t particularly like it. It would be easier to say what he needed to if she hated him instead.

He didn’t like being feared. Didn’t like being reminded that for most people in the realms, he was the deciding factor between them continuing to breathe, or ending up being sent to the Hall of the Hells.

“So you have heard of me.” He forced himself to smile, “You screwed with people I care about. You worked for someone I would gladly have executed. Slowly. Inch by inch. Do I need to tell you what you need to do next, Priestess? Or do you understand the stakes?”

The woman pulled the blanket up to her chin, looking at him cautiously, “Zanfir will leave the East Continent.”

Trei nodded curtly, “Good enough.”

She shook her head, “No, it isn’t. I have crossed a god. This nation exists to serve the gods. Gods that I hear are dead, as well. If you are all that remains, then we must pay penance.”

“I’m not that kind of god.” Trei shook his head, “I just want everyone to stop butchering each other. I had enough of that when I served in the Ozandian army. Back when I was mortal.”

The Priestess nodded slowly, “I heard stories. That you were mortal. A blacksmith. I did not understand them. You are a god. Not just a god. You rule the gods. Though I suppose that means less now, than it did.”

“I was.” Trei nodded, “A terrible blacksmith. Really. An apprentice, that was so stupid, that I got toasted by a mage’s stray fireball. I got buried at the Pit, on the edge of Calis. Do you know what that is?”

“No.” The Priestess shook her head.

Trei sighed, “After they strip your body of any valuables, they throw you into a collection of bodies. To rot, and burn. The Pit is always on fire. Thanks to the plague, there are always more bodies to burn. Vastras used it as an energy collector.”

The Priestess shivered, clearly disgusted, “You, who became a god, were thrown into this place?”

“I was a pretty worthless human being.” Trei laughed, “But Summer brought me back. As a ghoul, and something more. That was the catalyst to my ascent. I died a poor death, and then I was resurrected as something sort of horrible. Yet, Summer loved me. That’s what preserved me. Made me become what I needed to be.”

The woman shook her head, “I do not understand it. Not as a god. How can... You come from such a place?”

“Because gods aren’t what you think we are.” Trei snapped, “We’re not pretty perfect things sitting on a shelf. We destroy lives. That’s what we’re good at. Our champions are cursed to have to deal with us. They have their lives wrecked, and the lives of anyone touched by them. We are violence and change. How can you expect us to be radiant?”

The Priestess sighed heavily, “If that is what you say, I cannot argue.”

“Gods get it wrong.” Trei replied, “Or they wouldn’t all be dead, would they?”

The woman sighed, “I am forced to admit it.”

“Good.” Trei nodded, “Then maybe you should realise the problems your country has. That focusing on religious hatred has brought all the crazies out of the woodwork. That when you declare peace, because I’m forcing it on you, that is when they will come for you. Your country won’t have peace. It will have chaos. Hatred begets hatred, and you’ve been on that cycle for so long there’s no escaping it anymore.”

The Priestess looked at him and nodded, “I am aware. The people are starving. The fire in the sky, it hurt us. There is no food. No water. The poor are dying from disease, and even the rich suffer. Our magic is tainted. Only the stones are free of it, and the mines are running dry. This was a chance. To find something better.”

“The calamity did that everywhere.” Trei replied, “A cost of the gods fighting each other. A cost caused by a human trying to stop Ausosa from turning a god into her personal puppet.”

The Priestess nodded, fear in her eyes.

Trei smiled slowly, and held up his hand. There was a flash of light as a scroll appeared in his hand. He tossed it onto her bed, “This is a spell. A Fury found it. It can heal the effects of the calamity. Maybe that might be something to help. It will still be difficult. You have a very angry country, right now. The nations around you are nervous. But this is what I give you. Don’t make me clean up a mess for you, again.”

She nodded.

He turned, reappearing in his quiet house. It was quiet, this place in Namatay. There was nobody else here. Not even Talin.

Ashwen was fighting her war, defending her people. Picking up the pieces of whoever survived Shahr’s destruction. She was a good leader, albeit naive. Maybe her time across the Void had been enough. She might be a queen now, just like she wanted. He knew he certainly didn’t want to be king. Not with Summer gone.

This would be his home, regardless of whatever came next. He felt content with that, more content than he should have been. A space, to grieve. Maybe that wasn’t a terrible thing.

Aurili

She blinked weakly, looking at a brown sky. She wasn't sure why she could even see a sky. Didn't feel like she should have been able to. She couldn't quite remember everything, but she knew something had happened to her. Something inside her had... Snapped.

Her head hurt. Her chest hurt more. If her arms weren't too heavy to lift, she might have reached up to touch one of them, but she could barely even make them shift at all. Which just made her feel like the ground was moving underneath her, rocking.

A hand touched her head, stroking her hair gently, "Hey."

Aurili blinked. She must still be asleep. Trapped in a dreamworld of horrors. The same nightmares that had plagued her since Lilibeth had died. Since she'd seen the light go out of those brilliant pink eyes.

"Don't ignore me, praetor." The woman stroking her head snapped angrily.

Aurili swallowed, and spoke hoarsely, "I don't want the dream to end."

"Is this a dream, is it?" Lilibeth replied, smiling down at her, "If it is, it's a good one, then. A dream where I get you, and you don't get to run away."

Aurili looked up at him, tears slowly running down her cheeks, "How are you here, Lilibeth?"

"You said it was a dream." She smiled at her.

Aurili glared.

Lilibeth sighed, "A gift. From someone you know who is very cute, and for whom time doesn't mean anything at all. I don't quite understand how she did it."

Aurili laughed slowly, "Alfar told you to say it that way."

"Yep. But she is cute." Lilibeth laughed, "Like a little sister. You wouldn't believe she'd fought in a war. That she rides around on a godsdamned hellhound that's probably eaten more people than we've killed."

Aurili nodded, "True. I've seen her fight. That little elf doesn't look so cute when she's completely untouchable. If she wasn't so interested in just being happy, she'd be even more terrifying."

Lilibeth shifted, lying down with her head on Aurili's burning chest. One arm went around her, holding her, "This isn't a dream. It really isn't. I'm here."

Aurili smiled, trying to stop from bursting into full blown sobbing tears. "I guess you managed to survive the next few days."

Lilibeth grinned up at her, "Oh. So does that mean I get lucky?"

Aurili sniffed, "So lucky. Every moment. I never ever want to let you go again."

Lilibeth snuggled up and kissed her cheek gently, "You can't even hold me right now. I don't think you get a choice in that. I'm the one who has to hold on. I have to do the work, like normal."

Aurili winced, "I'm sorry."

Lilibeth kissed her cheek again, "I don't mind. Really, Aurili. I waited my whole life for you. I care too much to let anything get between us."

Aurili turned her neck with extreme pain, “And that joke about having kissed me before? Were you just distracting Ausosa?”

Lilibeth blinked, “How did you know about that? Ausosa?”

Aurili winced, “Ausosa had you. Or a version of you.”

Lilibeth shivered, “Well. That’s creepy. Uhm... You’ve kissed me, before. Once. A very long time ago. We were both just kids. Do you remember your sixteenth? When we got black out drunk because we’d lost twelve men?”

Aurili laughed, “No. I really don’t remember it. I remember the morning after. My head hurt like shit, but you still made sure we were both in the training yard. It was so hard to pretend I was better than the greenies.”

Lilibeth smiled, and Aurili glared, “Details.”

“You suddenly turned to me, and kissed me.” She shrugged, “It wasn’t great. You were drunk, and threw up a little. Told me that if it wasn’t for Wrodin, you’d be jumping me.”

Aurili’s cheeks flushed red, “Oh. That sounds worse than not great.”

“You let me know you cared.” Lilibeth smiled, “With less of a hint than usual.”

Aurili kissed her nose, “I do. I love you. Absolutely.”

Lilibeth grinned, “Feeling like you can move some more, are you?”

“Not... Enough.” Aurili said hesitantly, “I don’t think I’m capable of doing what I want to do.”

“We have a tomorrow.” Lilibeth replied, tracing a finger across her stomach, “I’ve waited a whole lifetime for you. I can wait a bit longer.”

Aurili winced, “Yeah. You’re not dropping that anytime soon, are you?”

“Nope.” Lilibeth laughed.

Aurili kissed her. It wasn’t the best timing, but she wanted to. She just wanted Lilibeth all to herself. Wanted her to kiss her back. Without the vomit.

Lilibeth was better than the fake. She didn’t just kiss her back. She wasn’t perfectly soft. Her arms felt like steel as they held her. A hand against the back of her neck. One of her legs circling her waist.

She moved, sitting atop her, kissing down, trying not to press on her chest. Aurili reached up weakly, one hand shaking as it touched Lilibeth’s thigh. The soldier laughed, smiling at her before grabbing her cheeks and kissing her again fiercely.

Her tongue brushed up against Aurili’s teeth, and opened her mouth willingly. She reached up tentatively, feeling Lilibeth’s tongue dance against hers. She breathed through her nose, focusing on this feeling, this moment. When nothing mattered except letting Lilibeth know that she loved her. Her heartbeat was out of control, and she felt hot, flustered.

Lilibeth broke the kiss reluctantly, leaning up, “Are you really going to go and die whilst I’m kissing you? I know you want to die happy, but that seems a little unfair. Lets get you to a healer.”

Aurili glared at her.

Lilibeth shrugged, “Sorry. I’m not about to lose you. Not now.”

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Aurili glared at her.

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Alfar

She patted the head of her dog, looking at the city sadly. She couldn't save them all. There were only a few. The few that were held together by the will and desire of the gods. They were the ones she could find, and show them how to walk back to this now.

She wished she could save them all, but it didn't work that way. She had to remember the deaths of so many. Brave mages, on both sides of the battle. Soldiers who had sailed across the seas, thinking they were saving their families from starvation, dreaming of a better world. People, just defending their homes. Thinking that the people standing against them hated them, that they were evil.

It was the lie of every soldier. That the person trying to kill you, deserved the death you brought on them. It made survival easier. It was a lie that she couldn't have. Because she knew everyone she killed. She knew every hidden secret of their lives.

She knew the widows. She remembered them crying as they got the news in a few days. The screaming as they were told that their loves had died in the service of their nation. For some, the love would turn to hate when they heard that the mission had failed. Not everyone survived the news. Suicide was the only way out of the shame, or the guilt, or the anger, that they felt.

So many spiralled into depression, losing their ability to feel joy. Like Ausosa had tried so hard to do to her. Alfar could remember them struggling to eat. Crying into the cereal some mornings, as the weevils gladly ate the tears.

This was her curse. She saw everyone, she knew everyone. She remembered their deaths. All of them. In the end, everyone dies. Everyone, everywhere, dies. She knew it. She could see it. Some people would use it as an excuse. Push away the whole world, to make it hurt less. She couldn't do it. She'd tried. She remembered trying, remembered knowing she was going to try, and fail.

She cared about everyone.

Garmr whined, putting his head on her knees. Sensing her depression. Ausosa's victory worming its way ever closer to her heart. Stealing the happiness from her. This always happened, when she remembered things. Past things. Future things. That's why she wanted the moment. To just play with her puppy.

He smelled. Burned metallic fur. Rancid blood. He needed a bath. He'd enjoyed himself too much, and he'd nearly got hurt because of it. He couldn't heal like other creatures. Hellhounds weren't designed to last. They were weapons. Weapons break. He was broken when she found him. She'd put his gear system back together. Reconstructed him from the memory of when he was built. She knew that one day she wouldn't be able to.

Garmr let out a low rumbling moan, trying to drag her out of her head, trying to focus her vision on him. On this moment. When not everything sucked, just most everything. This wasn't the end of a war, it was the beginning of one. This defeat of Zanfyr was what kicked it all off.

The hellhound blew his nostrils at her. She smiled and patted him, "A hundred years. I can relax for a hundred years, that isn't so terrible. Before the Sins. They're not nice. The years before them were. My teashop."

A Sibyl approached slowly from the side, "Alfar?"

She nodded, "Alteo is dead. I know. She dies protecting Antoinette. Our princess. Shannon's favourite. Alteo smiled as she died. It wasn't a waste. He's coming. Which is bad. But the bad has

to be.”

The Sibyl felt confusion, and little else. It didn’t surprise her. Alteo was one of the few that could follow her, as her mind bounced between the timelines, watching them and trying to make sense of them.

Alfar nuzzled her dog, and then leaned back, “Can I have the candy?”

The Sibyl blushed, surprised, “How did you know I had...?”

“Garmr likes it.” Alfar smiled, failing to explain that she’d seen the Sibyl slip it into her pocket that morning, as she did every morning. Trying to hope that none of the other Sibyls could see it. Too embarrassed to admit she liked to take care of herself.

The Sibyl held it out, and Alfar unwrapped it as the hellhound danced in front of her excitedly. The sugar wasn’t good for him. It gummed up the gears. It was a pain to clean, the way it encrusted around the metals. Yet, a treat every now and then wasn’t bad for him. She didn’t remember if she’d given him any recently. She didn’t think so. It was hard to focus. To remember recent from what came next.

She tossed it into the air and smiled, “You want direction. To know how the Oracle should advise the Assembly.”

The Sibyl nodded, and Alfar sighed heavily, “Evacuate the city. Send groups to Nemirankath, Mabad and Chuganlu. You need to get started. Right now. We don’t have much time.”

She stood up, patting Garmr, and turned, “He’s coming, and he isn’t happy. The ones who greet him will die.”

The Sibyl ran off, as Alfar began moving slowly towards the burned buildings, trying to focus. It was hard. The fixed event was over. The flux of what happened next was beginning to hurt. So many choice, so many possibilities. He brought them all into focus. So many branches of reality that tailed off into nothing.

She didn’t like remembering the end of all things, but that is what he represented. But he needed to be here. Antoinette had to die to let him out. That was what had to happen, or Ausosa would win, in the end. Tyr would win.

There was a path back from this madness, but it was a difficult one to walk, and she wouldn’t be there to help them all. Couldn’t be. She could not account for every possibility, all she could do was remember them. Remember everyone dying, over and over and over.

Alfar paused for breath, wiping away frightened tears. She hated moments like these. Moments where everything turned to piss and shit. When she couldn’t do anything, she just had to experience the same horrors, repeatedly.

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Dyys

She stood in the field, holding the ball of light, feeling sweat running down the back of her neck. It felt strange to be doing this again. She'd done it so many times, crossing the whole of Nal'farah, walking across Balavid. It was how she'd met Bel.

She remembered Bel's first spell. The container for a ball of light, just like this one. She'd been amazing. A natural. With just a small amount of magic she'd made a container strong enough to contain a djinn. It had rebounded, too. Knocked Bel out. Even the best of beginners couldn't avoid the rebound. Magic was tough like that. Cruel like that.

She'd made her honey on toast. The bread had been a gift from Wrobin. She'd used her weak transformation skills to make it something more. She couldn't make something from pure magic in those days. Hadn't learned how. She had since. But you still didn't get something for nothing. If all you ate was what you magicked up, you wouldn't get anywhere. You'd burn more energy making it, than eating it. Unless you were Fae in which case sunlight was enough to give you more magic.

She'd made her promise to Bel then. In that moment. She hadn't told Bel what it meant. She hadn't known if Bel even liked her, then. She'd teased her about fighting bandits naked. Though she hadn't been embarrassed at the time, she was when Dyys mentioned it again.

It was hard to focus on the spell. Eight elements. A powerful and dangerous spell, a spell of creation. Enough to cleanse the ground, and cure it. To grow the crops again. All the same, her thoughts continued to turn from it, to the woman she'd lost.

The woman she'd made screw her hands up as they lay in the hay. The woman who'd told a god to get lost. Dyys had enjoyed that. Continuing to tease her as people tried to interrupt them. It had been a thrill for their first time.

Their only time.

Bel's face going red, her back arching. Gasping for air, before Dyys had even done anything. Dyys felt flushed at the memory. A mixture of tears, sadness, and what she'd felt in that moment. It was confusing. She felt guilty for feeling these after she was gone.

She concentrated on the spell. Feeling all the elements moving together in front of her, combining into a perfect storm. Binding into the magical matrix, forcing the Fel out. Destroying it faster than it could reinfect the area. Driving it out.

Dyys fell sideways, clutching at the magic as it burned her. Threatened to burn her away. To take the pathetic remnants of her life, the shreds she had left, and make them nothing.

Astarte appeared standing over her, one hand on her hip as her eyes blinked slowly, vertically. The Fury sighed and reached out, grabbing the magic from her without any effort, and slammed the healing spell into place.

Dyys coughed blood on the ground, and her daughter rolled her eyes. "Alone."

She sat up, leaning on her hands, and nodded, "I know. I'm not alone. But I wanted to be. The city has enough problems to occupy you."

Astarte glared at her, crossing her arms.

Dyys sighed, "Can't I be alone to mourn your other mother for five minutes? I'm trying. For you, and Akheron. Trying my best... But I'm still missing her. Every moment. She was everything, Astarte. Everything."

The young Fury watched as her mother cried, and crouched in front of her. She smiled sadly, “Mi ken.”

Dyys smiled and touched her face, “Sorry. I’m not angry at you.”

“Mi ken.” Astarte nodded, helping her to her feet, “Da Fel?”

Dyys looked at the sprouting field, impressed. “You really do have a disturbingly good grasp of magic, little one.”

Astarte rolled her eyes. “Nok nam’e.”

Dyys laughed, “You don’t like being called little? Fair enough. The Fel is fading. You did it. I am proud of you.”

Astarte grabbed her arm, leaning against her, “Muk’da. San mi.”

“No.” Dyys said, “Right now I don’t want to tell you about her. I’m remembering all the things I shouldn’t talk to you about. Things like missing the way her hair smelled. The way she screwed up her face when we... You get the point.”

Astarte sighed, “Alone.”

“Yeah.” Dyss nodded, “Not something you can share. When you lose someone, there’s always moments like these. Moments you can’t give to anyone else. I’ve lost so many people recently. Not just Bel. Alexis, too. Everyone else trapped in hell when Hero died. Some might have survived, but even amongst Furies, people who can move from one plane to another aren’t plentiful.”

The girl sighed, sitting on the new grass, and patted beside her. Dyys smiled, sitting beside her, and squeezed her shoulders, “Which one of us is Muk’to?”

Astarte laughed, “Sky falls. Furies... Wait.”

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Astarte made a fake hiss of irritation at the last word, and then looked up at the sky, thinking quietly. She’d grown up fast. The growing pains should be hitting her badly, about now. They’d hurt Dyys badly at her age. Like dancing on glass. Bathing in fire. Beating your head against a rock until one of you broke.

Yet, the girl was fine. She wasn’t just fine. She was immaculate. Her hair in place, her aura perfectly balanced. Her emotions rising and falling in calm waves. Her daughter had something few people ever achieved. She was perfectly centred. No enemy would ever be able to make her so angry she took a stupid risk. For a Fury, this was beyond unheard of. It seemed impossible.

“Gods coming.” Astarte said slowly. It might be an observation, or a prediction. Without Ausosa clinging on to the core of the ’verse, the gods might be coming back. Whatever balance had existed before, however, was gone. It would take time to sort out this mess. Time for the balance to be found again.

Dyys closed her eyes, listening to the wind. The smell of blood, flesh and smoke were still on the wind. It’d be months before the city smelled like anything else, even this far outside the walls. War didn’t go away just because no one was fighting anymore. Recovery took years. Generations. People don’t get replaced easily.

Thousands were dead. Zanzir might not have any more sons and daughters to carry on the name, to carry on industry. They might have bet their future on this mad gamble, to take another continent in the name of a divine. Be Liphu wasn’t much better off. Plenty of civilians had been

killed, directly, or by the fires. The hundred odd soldiers they had were gone. Gone in an instant.

Human life was easy to end, but it wasn't cheap. The costs would take decades to fully realise, even from this one battle here. Yet, battles had taken place across the entire continent. Too many, too recently. Even the arena, where they'd forced her to fight. Where she'd let her anger butcher them.

Astarte looked over at her mother, "Bad feeling."

Dyys nodded slowly. She wasn't just feeling depressed because she was. There was something else. Something she couldn't put her finger on. Like the entire realm was being suffocated under the weight of a great loss.

She stood up hesitantly, holding her stomach, "Oh no. Not right now."

Astarte looked up at her expectantly, and Dyys shook her head, gritting her fangs, "The realm isn't sad. It's afraid. Kregstad. Ausosa might be dead, feels like she is... But whatever she's done, is done."

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"He." Trei corrected, sniffing the wound, "Oh gods. I smell almonds. A tainted blade. Spear?"

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Trei shook his head, "He comes out, when I die. That's the end game here, Ashwen. You need to take the Fae, and run. Go somewhere where no one can find you or yours. Like Janus did with his army. Create somewhere new, unconnected to the rest of the 'verse. Hidden. No channels. No direct path to it from anywhere. Good enough to hide from most of the gods."

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Ashwen wiped a tear from her cheek, “So that’s it. The Fae are just running away, again?”

“Not running away.” Trei shook his head, “That would mean you fear them. The Fae don’t need to fear humanity. You’re leaving so they don’t self-destruct. The Fae can’t live in this realm. They can’t live scattered, either, like before. No more realms and family houses. One new place, to call home. No more Evening Realms. The Evening Realm.”

Ashwen smiled sadly, “Do you know why they were called the Evening Realms? In memory of Ausosa. The Dawn. She fell. It was. . . Sentimental.”

Trei shrugged, “So? Remember the good. She wasn’t always a terrible monster that destroyed the ’verse. Try and remember her for something better than she became.”

Ashwen sighed, “You’re set on this, aren’t you?”

“I don’t see any other way forward.” Trei sighed, “Ausosa closed all the doors. The gods will come back, if Pheter doesn’t. If he does, then everything that they were goes to him. That’s why I have to die. Become the gateway between where he is, and where he wants to be. And when he gets here, the Fae can’t be. Because then they’ll side with humanity, and even if we win, we’ll all fucking lose.”

The Fae nodded reluctantly, “I’ll gather our forces. You’ll never find us. Even if you survive.”

Trei nodded, “Make sure you follow through with that particular promise, Ashwen.”

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Ashwen smiled sadly, “Do you know why they were called the Evening Realms? In memory of Ausosa. The Dawn. She fell. It was. . . Sentimental.”

Trei shrugged, “So? Remember the good. She wasn’t always a terrible monster that destroyed the ’verse. Try and remember her for something better than she became.”

Ashwen sighed, “You’re set on this, aren’t you?”

“I don’t see any other way forward.” Trei sighed, “Ausosa closed all the doors. The gods will come back, if Pheter doesn’t. If he does, then everything that they were goes to him. That’s why I have to die. Become the gateway between where he is, and where he wants to be. And when he gets here, the Fae can’t be. Because then they’ll side with humanity, and even if we win, we’ll all fucking lose.”

The Fae nodded reluctantly, “I’ll gather our forces. You’ll never find us. Even if you survive.”

Trei nodded, “Make sure you follow through with that particular promise, Ashwen.”

Aurili

She leaned up against the horse, her horse. She didn't know how Finnia knew where to go, but she'd found her near the ruins of the stables, as they were searching to leave.

She was still struggling to breathe, but from the memories that were coming back, she was lucky to be doing that. She didn't know exactly what had happened. It wasn't clear yet, every time she tried to remember, her head hurt. What she did remember, and she hoped she was wrong about, was Ausosa ripping her heart directly out of her chest.

Lilibeth walked over, with a small sack of grain. She added it to their supplies, "Sorry, Finnia. There isn't much to spare."

Aurili sighed, "Whole city is evacuating. Looks like Alfar's in charge. Or something like it."

Lilibeth nodded, "Any idea where we'll go? You're a fugitive from Balavid. I can dig up my own body from a grave there. But it is where we spent all our lives."

Aurili shook her head, "No idea. Staying in Mishia seems a good idea. They don't mind people who are different, like us. The eyes of a prophet, and my own."

Lilibeth laughed, "Really? After Zanfir completely trashed them. Attacked the capital. If there's one nation across the ocean that can portal entire armies, there's another. Nations steal from each other."

Aurili sighed, "Do you think any of the others can stand up against something like that? Yurk, who got taken out by goblins? Ozandius with their orks, elfin and dead queen and priestess?"

"I don't think anyone is getting through this." Lilibeth shook her head, "I think we need to go somewhere else. Across the sea. Or a new realm. Or maybe we should be nomads. We're tough enough for that."

Aurili smiled sadly at her, putting an arm around her, "You have a great way of bringing down the room."

Lilibeth grinned and kissed her cheek, "You know me."

Aurili sighed, "Nal'farah. We'll head there. I heard a certain wandering mage was there, curing the blight from the calamity."

Lilibeth blinked in surprise, "Dyys. You really think she made a difference in all of this? The calamity?"

"Yeah, I do." Aurili nodded, "That Fury is something else. I saw her come back from death to try and hit Ausosa a second time, when the gods died."

Speaking of which, she had no idea how she could approach Ausosa and fight her when nobody else had been able to. No idea how she could swing a sword so fast that it would warp. Something had been with her. It wasn't like when Wrodin had fought with her, it was something more than that. Something more intense, more powerful.

It scared her, more than a little. Scared her that she was able to fight and kill the thing that had wiped out the gods. The people whose whims directed the entire 'verse. She was not more powerful than any of them, and yet she'd been enough to fight Ausosa.

Lilibeth sighed, "Still trying to work things out?"

Aurili shrugged, "I'm sorry. I can't let it go. I don't like not knowing things. Not understanding them."

“Of course.” Lilibeth rolled her eyes, “That’s why you and I survived when everyone else died. We try and work out why, so we can keep fighting. That’s the only way forwards.”

Aurili nodded, and then put both arms around her waist, “You are crazy calm for a soldier who has come back from the dead to find everyone else dead.”

Lilibeth shook her head, “If I look like I’m coping... I’m not. All I have left is you. Right now, that’s enough.”

Aurili leaned her forehead against hers, “That’s what I figured. So we are really running away? As far away from here as we can get?”

Lilibeth laughed, “You know me so well. Yeah. I want to run.”

Aurili kissed her, holding them both for a moment as her chest felt like it was on fire, and then pulled back, “So. Let’s run. Run as far as we can go.”

Lilibeth kissed her back, tears falling on her cheeks as she did.

Alfar

She was waiting, with a tray of sugar cookies and two cups of tea when he arrived. She smiled sweetly, waving, whilst Garmr let him know that he better not make her cry.

Trei sat down slowly, looking at the spread, and then at the city. "You're leaving."

"He's here." She replied, "He came here when you died. When you died and never came back, not ever. That's what happened. I cried. I didn't like watching you die. I don't like remembering it."

Trei winced, "So, it's fixed then."

"No." She shook her head, "You always die. Lots of ways. Head crushed beneath his foot. Heart torn from chest. Killed yourself, hating that Faith was sacrificed because of you. Lots of ways, lots of times. Every time, he comes. Doesn't matter when. Tomorrow, yesterday. Hundreds or thousands of years. It isn't fixed, but it is inevitable."

She picked up a cookie, chewing the edge of it, trying not to sulk. It was hard not to sulk, with him sitting in front of her, reminding her of his whole life. His shitty life. Mother experimented on and killed by a mage. Killed by a woman who created him, and loved him. Brought back by the woman he adored. Unable to help as every single person he ever cared about died, one by one. Murdered to force him down the path he was now unable to get off.

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"Is that what you believe, Trei?" Alfar said, smiling and biting her biscuit. Waiting for the penny to drop. Waiting for him to realise the truth in the one moment. This moment, before all others.

"They're coming back." Trei said slowly, "How is that possible? They were gone. Completely eradicated."

Alfar rolled her eyes, "Gods don't have souls, Trei. Souls are gifts from them. You don't destroy

the soul of a god. Don't extinguish it. You extinguish the god. Make them disappear. But they were never there in the first place. Gods are wind. It blows, because a god wanted it to. The ground stays together, because something willed it to. Gods are just things. Things that are, and are not."

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"I won't ask them to die."

She stood up, putting a hand on Garmr's head as the hellhound materialised, growling. He had warned Trei not to upset her. Now he was warning him to back off or he would eat him. That might actually be hilarious to watch. A weapon of mass destruction trying to destroy an inevitability.

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Trei rubbed his cheek, and looked at her carefully, "How long have I known you, Alfar?"

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Alfar hissed at him in frustration, ears bending backwards, "Gods, Trei! You are the most stubborn man I have ever met, except maybe Akheron!"

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“She doesn’t help.” Alfar replied, “She sulks about it, but she’ll get over it.”

Dyys

She found the two of them near the city exit, making out. The horse was waiting beside them, almost seeming to be trying to ignore them. She could tell why they'd stopped, the traffic for getting out was building up, but that wasn't the case anymore. They'd got distracted.

Dyys coughed politely.

Lilibeth looked over her shoulder and winced, "Oh, come on. Can this wait until we're not here?"

Aurili sighed heavily, "Fury. If you're here, there's something important. Isn't there?"

"Antoinette died, and broke one of the last locks on a certain prison door." Dyys said slowly, remembering Alfar's haphazard explanation. "The last lock is unlocking. Alfar wants you to help us."

Lilibeth glared, "Fuck off. She's mine. We are not just going to -"

Aurili held up a hand, "Relax, Lil. We don't get a choice in this. This is what we do. We're soldiers. If they need us, they need us. I owe Alfar, anyway. I was about ready to commit suicide, when she gave me hope again."

Dyys sighed heavily, "I don't much like her. You two... You do?"

Lilibeth relaxed slowly, "It is hard to hate someone that cute, who doesn't actually seem to notice or care about the giant shit falling on her head. She just wants to be happy, and left alone. Usually."

Aurili shrugged, "I'm going to need a new sword."

Dyys nodded, "Alfar is hooking us up. Trei is pissed. He wanted to do this on his own. Even more of a dick than usual. I get the feeling he really hates Alfar."

"She gets under his skin." Lilibeth replied and shrugged, "I don't know for sure. I barely met Trei. But I get the feeling he likes the self-sacrifice play. That he always thinks he has to solve everything. Alfar is the exact opposite. She doesn't like to get involved, she only does when she has to."

Aurili kissed Lilibeth's cheek, "So, shall we?"

"Fine." Lilibeth rolled her eyes. "I guess we can't ignore Alfar. Not after everything she's done for us. Anybody else joining us on this huge quest?"

Dyys shook her head, "Just the four of us. Five with you, Lilibeth, but I have a feeling Alfar will make you stay behind."

Lilibeth glared, pink eyes flashing, "Yeah, not happening. I just got her back. She's coming back to me in one piece. I'll make sure of it."

Dyys shrugged, "I've got kids, now. I'm not about to sacrifice myself. We're all coming back from this. That's the plan."

Aurili nodded, "Fine. Where are we meeting, and what are we doing?"

"Killing someone more powerful than Ausosa was." Dyys said with a wince, "Soldiers Rising. That's the entrance to the prison. There was a barrier, stopping anyone from entering, but Antoinette broke it. Somehow, because she was part elf."

Aurili shook her head angrily, "Damn."

“Alteo died, defending her.” Dyys assured her, and Aurili rolled her eyes, “That doesn’t make it better. So, I guess the shrines were holding this prison closed. What’s the bastard’s name?”

“Pheter.” Dyys replied.

Lilibeth nodded, and pulled a bow from the saddlebags, “Let’s go kill him.”

Trei

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Most of these bodies would never be buried. They'd be picked clean by the scavengers lying in wait. Even the bones and the armour would be carried off, by goblins and other less civilised creatures. For weapons, and less savoury purposes.

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"The curse. It requires an artificial god to regret what they have done." Trei snarled, "That's why you're taunting me with the scene where my wife, and my daughter, died. Trying to push on my guilt. There's just one problem with that, Pheter."

The man nodded, leaning on the white desk as it reappeared, "Yes. It does seem that you don't regret your lifetime of destroying absolutely everyone and everything you ever cared about. From the first moment, you were prophesied to be the destruction of the world. The instability you brought to the gods has done just that. Even fire rained from the skies because of you. The Burning Lands, Eldrasa, the Evening Realms, even Summer's Garden. All gone. All because of you. And you don't even regret it."

"You're wrong." Trei whispered, "I do regret it, but that isn't enough to break your curse, because you got it wrong."

The man looked perplexed, when Alfar spoke slowly, "Summer wasn't as stupid as you thought. She was going to make the curse like this, but she didn't. She instead will decide that what breaks it is contrition."

The Fae glared at her, "Oh, yes. The all seeing elf. Now let us see, what is your nightmare?"

The scene around them swirled, becoming a burning field outside a strangely human town.

Towering walls, flying the banner of Falenthia. Around them people were dying. Civilians, running and cut down by fire.

Atop a nearby hill, a boy in scales sat and watched. Around him were strange figures, not quite in focus. They were the ones killing everything, but the boy was the focus of the scene. His dispassionate look.

Alfar was crying. Tears running down her face, but not tears of fear. Something else that Aurili recognised all too well. A broken heart. The lack of understanding that she could lose something that meant so much to her.

The elf wiped her cheek with irritation, and smiled, "When we stay in this vision, Pheter, you die. You know who they are. You're making them too real."

The man grunted in anger, and then they were back up to their knees in ash. He glared at the elf, "So you fear an end to the world that hasn't happened. I could change that. Right here. I could end your fear by ending it all!"

Alfar shook her head, "I remember you doing that. And I remember you not doing that. You can't fix my fear. I am everywhere, Fae. I saw your birth. I saw your rebirth, when you came screaming out of the miasma, and Ausosa cradled you. When she saved you and brought you back. When Tyr discovered that she was hiding you in his house. I know you, Pheter. That should be fear enough for you."

"It is."

The man snapped across the enormous distance to the group as if it didn't exist. His elbow came in with a crushing blow. It didn't hit the elf. It struck the ribcage of Dyys. She'd moved almost as quickly as him, anticipating the attack.

Aurili stared in horror, unable to move fast enough to do anything about it, as Dyys ribcage snapped and curled inwards, becoming nothing more than soggy red flesh as she was propelled into the ground.

The Fury gasped raggedly, clearly dying. The red light in her eyes was flickering.

Aurili's sword was halfway out of the scabbard, still moving, still scraping slowly upwards as she watched the Fae in front of her. She could see his wings now. See that he wasn't human.

He'd killed their best fighter in an instant.

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“The curse. It requires an artificial god to regret what they have done.” Trei snarled, “That’s why you’re taunting me with the scene where my wife, and my daughter, died. Trying to push on my guilt. There’s just one problem with that, Pheter.”

The man nodded, leaning on the white desk as it reappeared, “Yes. It does seem that you don’t regret your lifetime of destroying absolutely everyone and everything you ever cared about. From the first moment, you were prophesied to be the destruction of the world. The instability you brought to the gods has done just that. Even fire rained from the skies because of you. The Burning Lands, Eldrasa, the Evening Realms, even Summer’s Garden. All gone. All because of you. And you don’t even regret it.”

“You’re wrong.” Trei whispered, “I do regret it, but that isn’t enough to break your curse, because you got it wrong.”

The man looked perplexed, when Alfar spoke slowly, “Summer wasn’t as stupid as you thought. She was going to make the curse like this, but she didn’t. She instead will decide that what breaks it is contrition.”

The Fae glared at her, “Oh, yes. The all seeing elf. Now let us see, what is your nightmare?”

The scene around them swirled, becoming a burning field outside a strangely human town. Towering walls, flying the banner of Falenthia. Around them people were dying. Civilians, running

and cut down by fire.

Atop a nearby hill, a boy in scales sat and watched. Around him were strange figures, not quite in focus. They were the ones killing everything, but the boy was the focus of the scene. His dispassionate look.

Alfar was crying. Tears running down her face, but not tears of fear. Something else that Aurili recognised all too well. A broken heart. The lack of understanding that she could lose something that meant so much to her.

The elf wiped her cheek with irritation, and smiled, “When we stay in this vision, Pheter, you die. You know who they are. You’re making them too real.”

The man grunted in anger, and then they were back up to their knees in ash. He glared at the elf, “So you fear an end to the world that hasn’t happened. I could change that. Right here. I could end your fear by ending it all!”

Alfar shook her head, “I remember you doing that. And I remember you not doing that. You can’t fix my fear. I am everywhere, Fae. I saw your birth. I saw your rebirth, when you came screaming out of the miasma, and Ausosa cradled you. When she saved you and brought you back. When Tyr discovered that she was hiding you in his house. I know you, Pheter. That should be fear enough for you.”

“It is.”

The man snapped across the enormous distance to the group as if it didn’t exist. His elbow came in with a crushing blow. It didn’t hit the elf. It struck the ribcage of Dyys. She’d moved almost as quickly as him, anticipating the attack.

Aurili stared in horror, unable to move fast enough to do anything about it, as Dyys ribcage snapped and curled inwards, becoming nothing more than soggy red flesh as she was propeled into the ground.

The Fury gasped raggedly, clearly dying. The red light in her eyes was flickering.

Aurili’s sword was halfway out of the scabbard, still moving, still scraping slowly upwards as she watched the Fae in front of her. She could see his wings now. See that he wasn’t human.

He’d killed their best fighter in an instant.

They didn’t stand a chance.

Alfar

She'd seen her die. She didn't tell the others, because she couldn't. Because every single time, Dyys took the blow. She was willing to die, to give them a chance.

This was her choice. That was what it meant to be alive. To make a choice, and to have the consequences be your own. No god seemed to understand it. To realise that they weren't the ones in control. It was everyone else who was.

All a god existed for was becoming the identity of a force in the world. They weren't really alive. Not compared to the ones who served them. It was their willingness to believe that controlled what a god could be. Power lay in their hands.

Attacking Pheter head on wouldn't succeed. She remembered him gloating as he killed her last. As he beat her to death with Trei's dismembered head. Giggling and laughing as her blood filled the air like a mist. Coating everything.

She remembered as Pheter used an arm torn from Dyys to do unspeakable things to Aurili. Reminding her that he was the monster in charge, and that in this situation a human was just another plaything to him.

She remembered as he forced Lilibeth to watch. As he bound her with ligaments he tore from Dyys. Bathed her in the blood of those she'd come to fight beside, as he desecrated the temple that was the woman she loved with all her heart.

This was the horror of the monster that she remembered. That the others would only ever truly know if they failed here and now.

Yet there was a difference between all her memories and this event. This event that was being fixed into time. That every timeline was converging on. There was a difference, that Alfar had ensured this time. An unpredictable element that wasn't supposed to exist.

She grinned grimly as her sword slashed through the muscle endings at the end of the Fae's wrist as he tried to punch towards Aurili. The muscles popped audibly as the blade passed effortlessly through them, spurting blood into the air.

She was the difference, this time around. She'd never come before, because she wasn't supposed to be here. She was supposed to gather the great warriors and send them on their way. She was supposed to focus on saving the city, and serving as the new First Sibyl.

Except this time she'd tossed her responsibility aside. This man had murdered and hurt so many people. He broke Antoinette's back on a bet that it would weaken the walls of his prison. Alteo had died defending her.

People would die because Alfar wasn't there to protect them. She knew it. She remembered saving them. She didn't care. If she wasn't here, then everybody would die. Because he would be able to come back.

There had been another way open to him. If he had, just for a moment, known that his crimes were wrong, and wanted to make up for them. Any fleeting moment of that belief would have done it. It hadn't happened.

He didn't regret the endless experiments. The way he had perverted what it meant to be Fae. The way he'd kidnapped Fae, and torn them open whilst they were still alive. How he'd stolen their memories, and then sent them back.

Astrian became the result of one of his experiments. Every lifetime, she was forced to remember

the man who had made it so she could hear an entire realm. Forced to relearn how to tune out the sounds around her, the buzzing thoughts of... Everyone.

Summer was forced to hold Astrian as she cried through the night. Reliving the fear of those six months, held by the monster pretending to be a man. Reliving the legacy of the man who her sister had tried to protect.

Astrian hadn't been alone. Claven was another. Her magic had been permanently locked away by his efforts, until Luna had torn open the door with brute force and shown her what it was like.

These were the legacies of the unrepentant man, who would kill Dyys. The warrior dying at her feet. Alfar couldn't allow it. Not anymore. He had to be removed. He had to die, so that everyone else could live.

Whatever the cost, she would pay it.

Pheter's broken hand crunched as it hit Aurili. His face contorted in pain as his target barely felt the blow. Aurili's hand came swinging up with an uppercut into his chin, knocking him backwards.

His leg came around sideways towards Lilibeth as she raced forward, a sword aiming for his chest. Alfar's sword entered the knee, passing cleanly through it and out of Lilibeth's way. Her sword pierced his shoulder as he twisted out of the way.

Alfar flipped as she was knocked backwards by the blow she knew she couldn't avoid, landing softly and catching Lilibeth. She righted her, and saw the Fae looking at her, glaring. She'd caught his attention.

He was right, in that he couldn't win if she was in his way.

He was also wrong that he should be trying to eliminate her right now. There was a bigger threat standing right behind him, angry and ready to do whatever was necessary.

Pheter didn't even get a chance to charge towards her. He'd been distracted from the biggest threat in the entire room.

Trei grabbed his wings, and tore them free of his back. The Fae howled in pain, falling forward as Trei tossed them aside. The wings crashed limply to the ground, like some kind of heavy paper. The blood pooling around them highlighting the fractal patterns in their surface. Alfar found it strangely beautiful.

She was watching the wings, trying not to remember what Trei did next. The way he grabbed Pheter's spine, tearing a chunk of bone from the man's back. Disabling him so he fell limply to the ground.

Trei climbed atop, and started hitting.

The others looked away, unable to watch. Trei didn't stop. He just kept hitting the man, over and over. Letting out his frustration and anger. Pouring out all the hate he'd been feeling since Tyr had tried to kill the woman that he loved.

Summer was gone. Faith was gone. Astrian, Luna, and so many others. Friends, and those who were nearly more than that. Trei hadn't always chosen Summer. There were other timelines. Other memories. Yet, in every timeline, everybody died. That was the weight on the shoulders of someone, who was in many ways still just that apprentice blacksmith, terrible at his job, and terrible at relating to people.

A loner, still unable to find his place in the world. Given power and responsibility that he never wanted. All he'd ever wanted, was to stay with the Fae that he loved. He'd been denied that.

By this idiot, and his legacy.

Alfar blanched. There wasn't much of the idiot left. "Trei. It's done. It's time to go."

Trei

He sat alone on one of the cubes that had been the gateway. He watched the procession of people fleeing the city. Most were scared, and hungry. They knew where they were going, but also knew it wasn't an answer to their problems. The city's supplies would be stretched to their limits. A flood of refugees wasn't something anyone was prepared to receive.

An elf was sitting next to him, smiling and tossing breadcrumbs to the hellhound that bounded around like it wasn't making the earth shake with every pounce. He didn't know where she got the breadcrumbs from. She seemed to have an infinite supply. He also didn't know why she was here. He hadn't exactly invited anyone to stay.

His knuckles were still bloodied. Torn from the strikes that had pulverised the skull. He could heal them easily enough. Healing himself was the first bit of magic he had learned, when Astrian was trying to make a ghoulish stink less.

He didn't, because he didn't want to. Right now, he wanted to remember the energy of that attack. He'd finally felt alive when he hit Pheter. When he'd given the bastard no chance to counter attack. When he'd blinded him with pain.

God or not, Pheter hadn't had a chance. He didn't deserve a chance. He wasn't repentant. He didn't care how many people had died to give him a chance to live. He had thought he deserved it. That the entire 'verse dying was a just cost to pay for his own life.

Trei didn't understand it. He offered his own life, time after time. He knew he wasn't worth shit, and that the lives of everyone else mattered more than his own. He would give it, gladly. It just didn't work out that way.

Instead, two children found themselves without a mother. Two children with the power to dimension jump, and cause incredibly destructive magic. Two children capable of healing the Fel.

The world needed them, but they had no guidance, not anymore. Their mother was dead. Dyys had been right. Trei didn't understand Furies. He didn't know what he was supposed to do.

Everything he did was wrong. Everything he had ever done had lead them to this point. The Fae fleeing beyond the worlds. Everyone he cared about, dead and buried. There was no greater failure in the 'verse than him.

He hadn't protected anyone. He hadn't been able to save those that mattered to him. How could anyone depend on him? He was a shit god. He didn't deserve the power that had been forced upon him.

Alfar leaned her head on his shoulder, snuggling in to the blood-stained figure. She smiled and put an arm around his waist, hugging him. She didn't say anything. Just sat there, holding him.

Trei felt tears spring to his eyes. Alfar was too kind to him. She above all should know what he was, how terrible a person he was, and still she showed him this kindness. He didn't deserve one iota of it.

"That's the point, Trei." Alfar whispered, "None of us deserve anything. God or mortal or eternal or celestial. None of us deserve our lives. We misuse them, we make mistakes. Hells, I know the mistakes I've made. The ones I will make. I know my future mistakes, and I can't avoid them. That's just what being alive means, Trei. Nobody deserves kindness. We're all fucking screw ups."

Trei smiled weakly, and shook his head, "Summer and Faith. They're dead, Alfar. I can never forgive myself for that. My wife, and my daughter. I can't bring them back. The lifestream barely

even exists anymore.”

“The lifestream is fine. She glows, tomorrow.” Alfar said, continuing to hug him, “This is our win, Trei. It hurts, but things can work themselves out now. The empires of the world are hungry and hurting, but tomorrow will still happen.”

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“You’ll find something.” Alfar smiled, “The others are coming. They’ll guide you, like they always have. Kao will smile and kick your ass, whilst she weeps for Wintralassa. The three new Fates will look to you for guidance. The new god of war will need your help. Trying to balance a life, and her own divinity.”

Trei frowned, “New gods? The god of war?”

“Aurili has accepted the mantle.” Alfar smiled, “Lilibeth made her. That was the reason that she could even distract Pheter for as long as she did. Aurili embraced her divinity, and moved beyond what was possible. She yanked Lilibeth out of the lifestream, out of time. Aurili will need you, Trei. She doesn’t understand what she is yet, not fully. But she knows the responsibility.”

Trei swallowed nervously, “She accepted it. I nearly rejected my own. We wouldn’t have survived, if it wasn’t for her.”

“For all of us.” Alfar nodded, as Garmr came up and dropped his enormous and heavy head in Trei’s lap.

Trei patted the hellhound nervously, and sighed, “I’m just a screw up, Alfar. I can’t be what everyone wants me to be. I can’t be the head of this pantheon. I can’t be what they want.”

“Which is why you have to be.” Alfar insisted, “That’s the point, Trei. The gods all failed. They managed to get so concerned about power that they neglected their duties and got killed. That shouldn’t be possible. Never again.”

Trei frowned slowly, “I have to reinvent them. Again.”

“Yes.” Alfar commanded, and he smiled at the elf, “How many times do I fail? Trying this?”

Alfar rolled her eyes, “Spoilers. Life has to be lived. You can’t just take the shortcuts, Trei. I’m more than a fortune teller’s orb.”

“I know.” He smiled at her, “You risked everything for us. We wouldn’t have made it without you. Thank you.”

Alfar smiled weakly, and Trei realised she was crying. He sighed and patted her head, “Remembering Dyys?”

“No.” The elf swallowed, “Remembering telling Astarte and Akheron. Soon. I don’t get to be there for them, not for a long time. Not until they’re my age. You do. Uncle Trei.”

He smiled, “I get to be there? I don’t know anything about Furies. How am I supposed to be there?”

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Aurili

Lilibeth pinned her against the wall with a grin. Aurili didn't get a chance to protest before she felt the kiss. She melted into it. She couldn't say no to Lilibeth. Not even when her timing was as crap as this.

They had just arrived, and she was certain that Trei would come by and see them any moment. This was the place he had created to attempt to gather the gods. To find them, and bind them to a single purpose.

A shining palace, standing in the Void. A place of hope. Where the gods could actually do some good, rather than focusing only on what they wanted. It felt so strange to think that she would be here.

Her thoughts didn't get much further than that. Everything in her was screaming for the woman pressed up against her, willingly giving her all to her. Demanding her all.

Aurili's arms relaxed and went around Lilibeth's waist, holding her gently. The woman broke the kiss with a cheeky grin. Before Aurili could ask, she felt the belt around her pants unclasp. They fell to the ground with a quiet thunk as her face turned red.

Lilibeth laughed, "Embarrassed?"

"Yes." Aurili choked out.

Lilibeth shrugged and kissed her again, fingers tracing around the edge of her underwear. Aurili felt something stirring in her chest. A monster that had never been fed, and was now being teased. She felt embarrassed. She could barely keep herself in control.

Lilibeth leaned forward and whispered in her ear, "I think I'm wearing too much. What do you think?"

Aurili swallowed nervously, "Can... We slow down? I haven't done this before."

Lilibeth leaned back, looking at her, "Neither have I. I fell for you, hook, line and sinker. There has never been anyone else I cared about, Aurili. Ever. If you need time, we'll take time. But this is my first. I've never even kissed anyone but you."

Aurili laughed, "Well. You know what you're doing."

Lilibeth flushed red, and then looked around the expansive place that was theirs. "Where's the bedroom?"

Aurili picked up her pants, awkwardly bundling them in one hand as she took Lilibeth's hand in the other, and they began walking.

This part of the palace that was hers felt like an entire wing. There were sitting rooms, and planning rooms. Libraries and reception halls. What they were looking for was found up two flights of stairs. The wardrobe alone was the size of the barracks at Balavid.

Lilibeth shoved her onto the bed, crawling up and kissing her neck gently. Aurili smiled to herself and flipped her, holding one wrist above her head. Lilibeth gasped quietly as she felt her lips on her chest.

Aurili held her in place, pinning her hips, as she slowly began to undo the shirt. One painstaking button at a time. Grinning at every squirm and gasp from Lilibeth. She'd teased her, so now she'd be on the receiving end.

Lilibeth broke a hand free and reached down, raising her chin to look up at her. The pink-eyed soldier glared at her, “I love you Aurili. You alone.”

Aurili smiled up at her, “I think I’m showing you.”

“No.” Lilibeth growled, “You have to say it.”

Aurili grinned cheekily, “Say what?”

Lilibeth didn’t take it well. She looked like she was on the verge of tears. Aurili let go of her quickly, moving up and hugging the woman tightly, “Oh you idiot. I brought you back from the grave, Lil. I brought you with me to the Palace of the Gods. I love you, mind, body, and soul. Everything I can care about you, and you alone. Nothing but you. I’m yours. Completely. You can do anything to me. I won’t stop you.”

Lilibeth smiled nervously, and kissed her nose, blinking back tears. “I’m sorry. I keep expecting to wake up. To be back in the ruins, alone and in the dark. Knowing I can’t have you. I used to. . . When we slept, and one of us kept guard, I used to sit there, dreaming of kissing you. Of holding you as my own. I knew it wouldn’t happen.”

“It has happened.” Aurili sighed, smiling at her, “Lil. Look at me. Scars and all. I’m yours. It took one of us dying before I got off my ass, but this is all yours.”

Lilibeth smiled at her, tears running down her face, and she hugged her tightly. They lay like that, quietly. Never wanting the world to interfere.

The fell asleep like that. Finally feeling safe, at home with each other. Knowing that what they had would last. That it would last as long as they let it.

Aurili

Lilibeth pinned her against the wall with a grin. Aurili didn't get a chance to protest before she felt the kiss. She melted into it. She couldn't say no to Lilibeth. Not even when her timing was as crap as this.

They had just arrived, and she was certain that Trei would come by and see them any moment. This was the place he had created to attempt to gather the gods. To find them, and bind them to a single purpose.

A shining palace, standing in the Void. A place of hope. Where the gods could actually do some good, rather than focusing only on what they wanted. It felt so strange to think that she would be here.

Her thoughts didn't get much further than that. Everything in her was screaming for the woman pressed up against her, willingly giving her all to her. Demanding her all.

Aurili's arms relaxed and went around Lilibeth's waist, holding her gently. The woman broke the kiss with a cheeky grin. Before Aurili could ask, she felt the belt around her pants unclasp. They fell to the ground with a quiet thunk as her face turned red.

Lilibeth laughed, "Embarrassed?"

"Yes." Aurili choked out.

Lilibeth shrugged and kissed her again, fingers tracing around the edge of her underwear. Aurili felt something stirring in her chest. A monster that had never been fed, and was now being teased. She felt embarrassed. She could barely keep herself in control.

Lilibeth leaned forward and whispered in her ear, "I think I'm wearing too much. What do you think?"

Aurili swallowed nervously, "Can... We slow down? I haven't done this before."

Lilibeth leaned back, looking at her, "Neither have I. I fell for you, hook, line and sinker. There has never been anyone else I cared about, Aurili. Ever. If you need time, we'll take time. But this is my first. I've never even kissed anyone but you."

Aurili laughed, "Well. You know what you're doing."

Lilibeth flushed red, and then looked around the expansive place that was theirs. "Where's the bedroom?"

Aurili picked up her pants, awkwardly bundling them in one hand as she took Lilibeth's hand in the other, and they began walking.

This part of the palace that was hers felt like an entire wing. There were sitting rooms, and planning rooms. Libraries and reception halls. What they were looking for was found up two flights of stairs. The wardrobe alone was the size of the barracks at Balavid.

Lilibeth shoved her onto the bed, crawling up and kissing her neck gently. Aurili smiled to herself and flipped her, holding one wrist above her head. Lilibeth gasped quietly as she felt her lips on her chest.

Aurili held her in place, pinning her hips, as she slowly began to undo the shirt. One painstaking button at a time. Grinning at every squirm and gasp from Lilibeth. She'd teased her, so now she'd be on the receiving end.

Lilibeth broke a hand free and reached down, raising her chin to look up at her. The pink-eyed soldier glared at her, “I love you Aurili. You alone.”

Aurili smiled up at her, “I think I’m showing you.”

“No.” Lilibeth growled, “You have to say it.”

Aurili grinned cheekily, “Say what?”

Lilibeth didn’t take it well. She looked like she was on the verge of tears. Aurili let go of her quickly, moving up and hugging the woman tightly, “Oh you idiot. I brought you back from the grave, Lil. I brought you with me to the Palace of the Gods. I love you, mind, body, and soul. Everything I can care about you, and you alone. Nothing but you. I’m yours. Completely. You can do anything to me. I won’t stop you.”

Lilibeth smiled nervously, and kissed her nose, blinking back tears. “I’m sorry. I keep expecting to wake up. To be back in the ruins, alone and in the dark. Knowing I can’t have you. I used to. . . When we slept, and one of us kept guard, I used to sit there, dreaming of kissing you. Of holding you as my own. I knew it wouldn’t happen.”

“It has happened.” Aurili sighed, smiling at her, “Lil. Look at me. Scars and all. I’m yours. It took one of us dying before I got off my ass, but this is all yours.”

Lilibeth smiled at her, tears running down her face, and she hugged her tightly. They lay like that, quietly. Never wanting the world to interfere.

The fell asleep like that. Finally feeling safe, at home with each other. Knowing that what they had would last. That it would last as long as they let it.

Alfar

She couldn't help feel like she'd screwed it up. Even though she knew that nowhere in the 'verse was there a right way of telling kids that not only was one of their mothers dead, now both of them were.

She knew that Astarte and Akheron would find their way. That they would grow into something more than they were now. That one day she would become their best friend.

All the same, when she left them with Trei, knowing her time with them was over for a time, she felt guilty. Like she hadn't done enough for them. They'd lost both their parents. She couldn't make up for it, if she tried. But she desperately wanted to try.

Except that wasn't her responsibility, not this time. Her responsibility was to Mishia. To keep the Sibyl and the Oracle intact. To prepare the nation for the coming wars.

Her vision might be difficult to understand, but it was what they would need. In the coming days, the nation would tear itself in half. North against south. That was inevitable, that was next.

Garmr licked the back of her neck, and she giggled spinning around, "Cut it out!"

The hellhound looked off into the distance innocently, as if he hadn't just coated her in drool. "I needed a shower after that. Don't eat the Sibyl when she has come to check on me."

Alfar walked into the small tent that was the communal shower area for the refugees. This city of tents was all she had to offer them. She knew the crops in the region wouldn't last. They needed to prepare for that too. The rat plague that devoured them.

It was difficult, and it wouldn't last. She knew that. She knew that Mishia would be defeated, and absorbed into one of the two rising empires. That there was nothing she could do to avert that fate.

All the same, she would try. She would keep her people safe.

She picked up the tin bucket of ice cold water and glared at it until it began to steam. She smiled and poured the warm water over head. Relaxing as the rivulets ran down her stressed shoulders.

She shivered as a memory ran across her mind. Of the stress in her shoulders when she stepped between Akheron and the guard.

"You're upsetting my boyfriend. Be nice, Sam. Or Garmr will get angry."

The guard held up his hands, "As you wish, Lady Alfar."

Alfar turned and grinned at him, "Come along, Akheron. I need to open the shop."

Why had she called him her boyfriend? He wasn't! Not then! Yet, she'd gone ahead and let that one slip whilst she was still a total unknown to him.

Alfar winced and rubbed her neck. The stress never really disappeared. For now, she would focus on trying to keep the nation intact.

She didn't have to worry about Akheron for a hundred years. Not until the tree.

Her tongue burned at the touch of his teeth, as he held her gently. Her hands weren't as gentle. She'd pinned him to the tree, not the other way around. Desperately trying to tell him she cared, when he'd finally given up on her and walked away. She hadn't meant to hurt him like that. She'd tried to fight her own fate, and instead had only fought with him.

He'd still broken her heart.

Alfar kicked the ground. She hated that she was like this. She just wanted to live in the moment.
